

Matthew 18:15-20 15th Sunday after Pentecost September 8, 1996

*15 "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."*

I remember a writer who spoke about saving up green stamps.

A long time ago grocery stores and gas stations gave green stamps with each purchase. The stamps filled the pages of a book. When many books were filled they could be redeemed for blenders and lamps and all those things that would make life easier and better.

The writer I remember was not talking about merchandize, but a special kind of green stamp saving, collecting. It went like this.

I get irritated with things that others do to me. But instead of talking with them about it, I take my hurt and store it up. One hurt after another, like green stamps collected in a book. Weeks, months, years of collecting until finally the last stamp, or what we call the last straw is added, and I explode. Or leave the church. Or refuse to speak. And I know I have a right to be this angry because the books are all full. But others are confused why I'm so upset over this one little thing.

Saving up green stamps. But Jesus has another way of living.

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one."

Notice Jesus did not say, "If someone sins against you, wait for them to come to you and apologize."

Jesus did not say, "If someone sins against you, talk with your best friend or with your husband or wife about it."

Jesus did not say, "If someone sins against you keep your hurt inside, stored like green stamps in a book."

Jesus said, "Go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone."

In another place Jesus says it the opposite way. “If you know you have sinned against anyone, go and be reconciled with your sister or brother.”

Whoever you are, the one that has hurt another or the one that is hurt Jesus word to you is the same, go to the other person. Talk about what has happened. And if the one on one talk does not do any good, then and only then are you to involve others.

“Take one to two others along with you so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Wounds in the body of Christ need to be dealt with before they become infected - before they can infect the whole body.

But even if the behavior of one meant that he or she needed to be cut out of the body, they are to be treated like a Gentile or a tax collector, Like Matthew, the tax collector Jesus called. Or like the Gentile woman whose daughter Jesus healed.

Matthew put these words of Jesus right after the parable of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep on the mountain and goes looking for the one that is lost.

And immediately following our gospel reading for today comes Peter's question: “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” And Jesus answered, “Not seven times but seventy seven times.”

This community of faith is very important to Jesus. In this gathering he intends to shelter you when you are battered and bruised by losses and failure, Jesus intends to rejoice with you in this community when a child is born or a new member added to your family in marriage. Jesus intends to feed you each week in this church through his word and with his body and blood. Even as you are dying Jesus intends to cradle you in his arms through his body, your sisters and brothers in Christ.

Anything that threatens the health of this body needs to be dealt with. There can be no holding of grudges here, no putting our personal needs for recognition and pride above the life and health of this body of Christ.

If my sister or brother comes to me and tells me how I am hurting her or him, I need to listen.

If two or three come to speak to me, Jesus says he is among them speaking to me.

We are not dealing with a human club here, a collection of like-minded people, we are the body of Christ, the church of the only Son of God.

Paul says to us: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another."

That means every one of us is the shepherd looking for the lost lamb, every one of us is the one who forgives seventy times seven, every one of us is the one who goes to our sister or brother and seeks reconciliation.

Last fall I visited the congregation I left ten years ago yesterday. Many had saved of their green stamps there, I did, too. All the books were redeemed with angry words and withdrawal. When I visited things had only gotten worse.

When there is love in the house of God it is a blessing beyond words. When love has been lost the sadness is so very deep.

I pray for us that we may continue to be a congregation where grudges are not held, and where reconciliation and forgiveness are everyone's responsibility and where the love of Christ is shared. Daily join me in that prayer.