

*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 almost started this sermon with this sentence: "In the more than thirty-seven years I have been a pastor the congregations I have served have never removed someone from membership for sinning." And then I stopped and thought about the people we have removed - always it was for inactivity. They stopped coming to be among the gathered people who hear the word of God and share in the meal of Christ's body and blood. Inactivity, As I thought about that a little more clearly I realized that every one of them has been removed from membership for sinning. They have turned their backs on the brothers and sisters God has given them in Christ. They have closed their lives to the preaching of the word of God, they have declared by their actions that they do not need the gift that God offers them in the body and blood of Christ. And I call it inactivity. I should call it serious sin.

What I normally think of as serious sin is really a sign that the first commandment has been broken. Adultery, theft, disobedience to parents, addictions, rudeness, not sharing with those in need all begin with putting someone or something ahead of God. The commandments begin: "I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods." Luther explained the meaning of this commandment with these words: "We are to fear, love and trust God above all things." Those who fear, love and trust in God hear God's word and seek to live by God's word.

I remember a Sunday morning class from years ago. Fifteen of us were gathered in a circle at the far end of the fellowship hall. It might have been one of those mornings when Howard Pressnell was dosing off in class because he had been up all night working the night shift. That morning the discussion was about conflict in the church. Two people in that class years earlier had been on opposite sides of an issue. For a time I am not sure they were even talking. But on that day they both agreed how important it had been that they worshipped together each week, even if

they were not reconciled. They spoke of those who left - who did not come for a while or forever – about how much those people had lost out on. Through gathering to hear the word of God each week, through meeting at the altar to share in the body and blood of Christ in time these two were reconciled. Enemies became friends once more. It was not easy but it was good. The Holy Spirit was at work.

What they spoke of that day has always given me the greatest joy in ministry – reconciliation – our reconciliation with God, our being reconciled to one another. Reconciliation is the miracle God does through the word and the meal.

Our gospel today begins with the hope of reconciliation: “If your brother or sister in Christ sins against you, go and point out the fault with the two of you are alone. If he or she listens to you, you have regained a brother or sister in Christ.”

“If that does not work then take others along so that every word may be confirmed by two or three witnesses.” Maybe if the person realizes that it is not just you but others also who are concerned, maybe that will help. I am reminded of an intervention with an alcoholic. Family and friends gather to testify to the alcoholic about the damage her or his drinking is causing.

But then Jesus speaks of a more drastic step. “If the offender refuses to listen to them tell it to the church and if he or she refuses to listen to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector.”

Sometimes when I have let someone know that we will be voting to remove them from membership because they are not coming to be among Christ’s people in worship – sometime they say, “We will change – give us another chance.” Sometimes they do change, sometimes not. But their changing is what I hope for – not their being removed from membership in this church.

Now there might be other sins that would lead to removal from membership. If someone was endangering children or taking advantage of those who are weak or through lies poisoning the atmosphere of the congregation,

then there would be cause for removal. But the case would need to be extreme to amputate a part of the body of Christ.

The second lesson is a summary of all of this as it says, “owe no one anything except to love one another.” Those we love we talk with when their behavior is destructive to themselves or others. But often all that we can do is to hold out our empty hands and let God fill them with Christ’s body and blood. And pray that our sister or brother in Christ does the same. Amen.