

11th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 23 (A)
September 6, 2020
Text: Matthew 18:15-20

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It was probably only a matter of time before something tragic happened. Now someone has been killed in connection with the nightly protests against racism and police violence in Portland, and the suspected shooter has been killed by police in Washington. Even though the city is peaceful almost everywhere, even though life goes on like normal almost everywhere, there have been a small number of people intent on causing disruption night after night. From the extremes of the political spectrum, they come to confront, to provoke, while city government seems hard-pressed to respond in appropriate or effective ways. While I support keeping pressure on our leaders to reform policing and reimagine public safety, violent protests do not seem to be helping us get there. And I wonder how you're feeling. Anxious? Worried? Angry? Grieving? Worn out? Confused? All of the above? Me too.

I want to share with you how our gospel reading for today speaks to me in a way that nurtures feelings of hope and courage, because my guess is that you need it every bit as much as I do. At first glance, this reading might not seem like much. In fact, I've heard these verses referred to as "instructions for excommunication," for kicking troublemakers out of the church—and I've heard of instances where they've been used that way. And that certainly doesn't seem very hopeful or encouraging. But that's not what these verses are really about—not by any means. Instead of "steps to take to kick troublemakers out," these verses are about "the lengths we will go to reclaim and renew a relationship that has been damaged." This isn't about cutting anyone off and saying "good riddance." Jesus is inviting us to apply all our effort and creativity to finding a way to bring healing to a relationship that is painful and broken. While it's true that not every relationship can be restored, it seems to me that the sad truth is that, mostly, people don't usually try. They either withdraw in hurt and confusion, or they lash out in anger and resentment—and that's that.

But Jesus wants to interrupt this reflexive kind of action and open our eyes to something more. Jesus wants us to begin by recognizing how precious each person, each relationship, is. Perhaps that's something we're learning to appreciate more deeply during this pandemic, when ordinary social gatherings aren't wise, and when we show our love and concern for each other by not going into each other's homes and not spending time in each other's company. It's hard. It can cause loneliness and feelings of isolation. I wonder if you've been learning more deeply than ever before the truth of how precious these friendships are. It's a truth easily undermined by social media, which discourages nuance and maximizes differences of opinion, making it easy to act as though everything were all-or-nothing. Social media makes it easy to "unfriend" others—to cut them off and go on through life without them. It's easy to forget how to treat the real treasures in our lives. But Jesus calls us to address situations of hurt and conflict in a very different way, a way that begins with mutual listening, and then moves on to more listening, and then steps up to more listening, and at each step of the way draws the whole community into greater supportive engagement. It's really just about the polar opposite of how culture teaches us to deal with hurt and conflict.

And here is where I find hope and courage. At the root of Jesus' approach to dealing with hurt and conflict is recognition that each person and each relationship is a treasure. They are worth holding onto. Those relationships are worth the struggle to renew. When we read these verses in context, they are surrounded by messages that open our hearts to others, that would prevent us from shutting our hearts down and shutting other people out. Immediately before our verses for today, Jesus tells a parable about a shepherd who leaves his flock of 99 sheep to seek out the one that is lost. And in summing up the meaning of this little story, Jesus says that it is the will of your heavenly Father that not a single lost one go missing. Then, immediately after our verses for today, Jesus answers a question about how often to forgive with instructions to forgive seventy times seven, which leads to another parable about how important forgiveness is for our daily lives. Precisely because of what a mess the human family is, forgiveness is unavoidable and essential. And this is exactly where we will experience God at work in our lives and in our world. God is already at work to bring healing to the human family. God is already at work to bridge differences, and overcome hostility and estrangement, and restore relationships, and create connection. In a world as messed up as this one, it's easy to get worn down by fear or boredom or anxiety or frustration or worry or fatigue. But God is already working for healing throughout the human family and throughout creation. God is carrying us all together from death to new life, and Jesus invites us, by following in his way of compassion and forgiveness, to be part of God's great life-giving work.

As I read through Jesus' instructions for dealing with a conflicted relationship, I see three gifts that we could take into all our relationships, three things that will make us and all our relationships stronger and more alive, three things that are especially important for this time, and for moving toward healing and new life.

The first is LISTENING. Listening requires humility—because maybe we don't know it all. There really isn't any room for self-righteousness when we're giving our best effort to hear another person's perspective. In order to listen, we need to resist being taken over by fear or blaming. Maybe you've heard that there's a reason we have one mouth and two ears—because listening is so important to healthy relationships, and to healing damaged relationships.

The second is HONESTY. We have to be willing to risk speaking our truth, even if it means we might not be perceived as nice. But to be honest, we need nuance, and need to resist oversimplification. Honesty is essential to healthy relationships, and to healing damaged relationships.

And third is SOLIDARITY. We really are all in this together, and we need to feel a sense of connection, to be for others and not just for ourselves. In this time, solidarity will mean feeling grief for the depth of pain the whole human family is experiencing now.

Listening and honesty and solidarity—these are gifts that Jesus gives us that allow us to move with God's way of healing in the world.

I'd like to invite you to do something. Would you'd take a minute just to scan through all the faces on the screen. Here are some of God's beloved children. If you're on Speaker View, click to Gallery View so you can see everyone. You might have to scan across two or three pages of faces. And then, just think, I'm sure there are many more people you know, who are treasures in your life. They are all such beautiful gifts. I wonder how you can bring greater listening and honesty and solidarity to these relationships, and then move more easily with God's way of healing in the world. You and I, we all know that there is so much hurt in the world, and sometimes relationships become strained and painful. But God is already at work to bring healing to the human family and to the whole of creation. And God invites us to discover how we can move with God's way of healing in the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.