

Matthew 18:15-35

It was not easy to find a unifying theme in today's reading. It follows Jesus' parable about the lost sheep, and his admonishment not to let anyone be misled or lost. It picks up today with some pretty detailed instructions about a process to follow if another member of the church sins against you, allowing for the possibility that things may go badly and the person may have to leave the community. THEN Jesus tells Peter that he has to forgive people who sin against him "seventy times seven," which is essentially always. Even if they are expelled from the church? Hmm. And THEN Jesus tells this terrifying parable about a king whose slave owed him the equivalent of \$100 million dollars, which is a hell of a loan to make to a slave, who listened to the slave's pleading and forgave the debt, and who then, on hearing this same slave refuse to forgive a debt of about \$50K, rescinded his forgiveness and threw the guy in prison to be tortured. "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart," said Jesus, smiling benignly on his dismayed disciples.

Well, I found the theme: community is messy.

What I appreciate about this pericope is that it reflects the reality that no one size protocol fits all situations. And it reflects the reality that the best-intentioned and best-executed efforts at mending a break in community may fail. Matthew's community was a collection of largely Jewish Jesus-followers who had recently left or been kicked out of their synagogue communities. They had to figure out how to exist as a new community. This Gospel is not written for a stable institution of people who have their community structure figured out and pages of bylaws to follow. Instead, the original audience was most likely a fragile, hurting, vulnerable collection of people trying to navigate a new kind of community amid hurt and

uncertainty. I suspect Matthew cobbled together some of Jesus' teachings on accountability and added his own special Matthean brand of hellfire and brimstone.

I've been listening to a couple podcasts about Hillsong, an evangelical megachurch that started in Australia and developed campuses around the world, including in the US. Apparently every campus had a big banner at the entrance saying "Welcome home," and people were attracted to it because the atmosphere *was* welcoming, there were fun and interesting people there, and lots to do. Over and over, I hear former members say, "I wanted to belong to something." But Hillsong had a dark side. Well, several dark sides. There was financial mismanagement of a predictable sort, exploitation of volunteers and staff, and sexual misconduct by clergy. But what really broke it, as I hear the stories, is that it wasn't a real community. If you spoke up about being overworked, or if you spoke up about the fact that some classes of volunteers got a break room with refreshments and others had to find a closet to take refuge in when they were exhausted, community was withdrawn. Friendship was withdrawn. It was not okay not to be okay.

This is what the psychiatrist Scott Peck called "pseudocommunity." In pseudocommunity, pain and conflict are avoided at all costs, and when addressed are referenced only indirectly. What people really feel isn't shared until the "meeting after the meeting" in the parking lot. The goal of pseudocommunity is a bland world of pretense where no one's feelings get hurt in public.ⁱ The most costly betrayal, it sounds like from these Hillsong survivors, is the betrayal of people's sense of belonging. In the midst of an epidemic of loneliness, their legitimate hunger was leveraged for the institution's benefit. And when they realized that they were being used, they were discarded.

The job of the church is to be a community, a genuine one. That means being willing to say, "Can we talk?" to someone whose behavior is troubling. It's pretty clear from Jesus' instructions in this passage that the goal of the intervention is to keep the community together. You talk privately with the person whose behavior concerns you, and if they're unreceptive, you bring another person who can either attest to the conversation OR tell you No, I think you were wrong about this. If you were right and the person is still unwilling to stop the problematic behavior, there is this mechanism whereby the whole church expels the offender. But they become "as a Gentile and a tax-collector to you," which, given the rest of the evidence in Matthew, means they become someone who could rejoin the community when they're ready.

It is the case that people can be abusive or even dangerous. We do nobody any favors when we ignore threatening behavior. Matthew is clear about that, even as he emphasizes forgiveness and inclusion. I've also been listening to a podcast from *Sojourners* about the shocking news that Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche, was a spiritual and sexual abuser for years and years. Unlike Hillsong, the friends and members of L'Arche are doing a very public and open exploration of how this could happen and how they themselves were complicit. For example, one former member recalls that when accusations against Vanier's spiritual mentor surfaced, she told herself that Vanier himself loved his mentor so much that he literally could not hear the accusations.ⁱⁱ She is very clear that he is the only one responsible for his crimes, but she is also unsparing in her self-examination as someone who didn't want to think that Vanier would lie. I am not seeing any institutional self-preservation, any denial of their own blindness, cowardice, misogyny, whatever contributed to their complicity. They are confessing, and in so doing, I have to think that their communities will be strengthened.

Neither of these examples is quite equivalent to the case Matthew gives us, in which an individual has to be held accountable in real time. They're more illustrations of failures of accountability, and in the case of L'Arche, attempts to be accountable after the fact. But even in the absence of a charismatic leader or a glamorous, highly-produced facade of a congregation, even when institutional preservation isn't at stake, the really hard thing about holding someone accountable is that they're likely to be defensive, or it's hard to set up conditions in which to have the conversation, or you feel so awkward and unsure that you can't speak straightforwardly, and the issue gets muddier. I think that's why Matthew just gives us this mishmash of instructions and stories, because the reality is that conflict happens AND that we're not very skilled at handling it because it's so unpleasant. Really, the best he can do for us is acknowledge that it happens, it's gonna happen even to Jesus' beloved community, and here are some tools that may help, because it's definitely worth all kinds of awkwardness and struggle to maintain a real community.

We're focusing on stories this Lenten season, because stories are multi-valent. They express far more than declarative statements. And in telling and hearing the stories together, we expose more of the truths of any story than we would recognize individually. The richness of *this* community is best expressed in stories. I feel particularly vindicated in this conviction about multivalence when I read that Jesus told his disciples, in the context of conflict, that " whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." "Binding and loosing" is language of ethical discernment, of determining right and wrong in a given case. Jewish rabbis "bound" a law when they determined (together) that a commandment applied to a given situation, and they "loosed" a law when they determined

that it, though eternally valid, did not apply under certain circumstances. How did this come about, this binding and loosing? Through discussion, through struggling with the text together. The truth emerges from the interaction of community members trying in good faith to make the best judgment. People are not getting bound or loosed; applications of the law are getting bound or loosed, in heaven following the very best earnest discernment of the congregation here on earth. God is with us in our struggle to do the best thing under the specific circumstances, even if we do it awkwardly or unsuccessfully.

I just read a statistic that one in ten high school students has attempted suicide. Our society is very sick, and I think partly because community is so attenuated. People lack reliable community. There is reassurance in today's reading, that real communities experience conflict. If we want to be a place where people feel at home and belong, and then a conflict arises, this reading from Matthew should remind us that we're not failing at community unless we ignore the conflict. It may be distressing, it may be embarrassing, it may even scare away some newcomers. But it's what genuine, reliable communities do: they recognize it, they approach it with respect and compassion for one another, and they rely on God's redemptive power.

Let us pray.

God of Truth and Forgiveness, we confess that we do not always want to forgive our enemies. As the psalmist says, sometimes we want to kill them. Other times we want to run like hell from the hard conversations that are called for. Help us to be brave and honest with each other. Thank you that you have bent us toward reconciliation that we may pass one another Christ's peace. It's a terrible thing to ask of us. I am not sure I can do it, but you are a wily God able to do miracles. May we be struck alive with the miracle of your grace, even to be reconciled with ourselves. Amen.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ <https://faithandleadership.com/jeremy-troxler-the-tie-binds>

ⁱⁱ <https://sojo.net/articles/its-tempting-dangerous-protect-faith-leaders-we-admire>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2011/08/%e2%80%9ccostly-truth-costly-forgiveness%e2%80%9d-a-progressive-christian-lectionary-commentary-on-matthew-1815-20/>