

Pastor Russell Lackey
www.reflutheran.org
Matthew 18:15-20

Care for the little ones

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. **16**But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' **17**If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. **18**"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. **19**"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. **20**For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

It is nice to be back from vacation. I must confess that if I knew that I had to preach on Matthew 18, I probably would have stayed an extra week on vacation. This is a difficult passage. It is not difficult to understand. Rather, it is difficult to follow in a gracious manner. I am afraid Christians do a lousy job of disciplining and restoring each other.

At seminary, I had a classmate who seemed to enjoy confrontation. It seems that his sole purpose in life was to serve as a warning to others. You know the type of person whose only tool in the toolbox is a hammer and everything he sees looks like a nail.

He was relentless. He always pointed out the faults in us. He would always mention Matthew 18 before telling us our faults. I remember one of my friends stood up to him and said, "You totally misunderstand Matthew 18. Matthew 18 is not a sword to cut off peoples' heads. Rather, it is a scalpel meant to bring healing!

My friend knew that the key issue of Matthew 18 is not discipline. The key issue is caring for the little ones. In verse 1, the disciples ask Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" It is just like the disciples to ask that question. There are always trying to be number one (much like pastors and bishops).

Jesus surprises them by saying that greatness in the kingdom means becoming like a little child (v. 2). Greatness in the kingdom is welcoming the little children (v. 5). Greatness is not looking down on the little ones (v. 10). Greatness is seeking the little ones when they are lost (v. 14). Greatness is disciplining and restoring the little ones. Greatness is forgiving the little ones (v. 35). My classmate was right. Matthew 18 is not a sword but a scalpel meant to bring healing!

This should not surprise us; the church is not a shrine for saints but a hospital for sinners. The church is made up of all kinds of people with all kinds of problems. You have heard the saying: what should you do if you find the perfect church? Don't join it. It will no longer be perfect. The church is a hospital for sinners.

This is one of the reasons we begin our service with corporate confession. Together we stand and confess to God and to each other that we are sinners. Together we ask God for mercy. The church is a hospital for sinners.

Theirs was a false, misleading dream
Who thought God's law was given
That sinners might themselves redeem
And by their works gain heaven.
The Law is but a mirror bright
To bring the inbred sin to light
That lurks within our nature.

(Salvation unto Us Has Come – verse 2)

Just because we are sinners does not mean we say nothing. It does not mean we do nothing. A hospital is a place for healing. We are to be instruments of healing for each other. That is why Jesus tells us the work we do on earth affects heaven. Verse 18, "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (18:18).

I want you to notice that the you is plural. Jesus is not simply speaking to Peter. He is not simply speaking to pastors. He is speaking to the larger community. The point is that the community of believers is called to work. They are instruments of healing.

When I first became a Christian, there was a woman at my home church who as such an instrument. Her name was Lou Paige. Lou always cared for me. She prayed for me. She challenged me. She also restored me. I remember coming to church after I had done something foolish. I was not very proud of myself at that time. I did not really want to go to church. When I walked into church, Lou was there to welcome me. Seeing my face, she knew something was wrong. Without missing a beat, she gave me a hug, kissed me on the cheek, and said Jesus loves you and so do I. Talk about restoring a sinner. I was put back together on the spot. This is what the church does.

This is what Jesus did for us. Jesus became a little child for us. Jesus welcomed little ones into his midst – sinners and tax collectors! Jesus left the ninety-nine sheep in order to seek the lost sheep. Jesus spoke the truth to the religious leaders in order to restore them. Instead, they killed him. It was on the cross where Jesus forgave the world. "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus is the greatest in the kingdom.

Jesus' great love continues today as he enters into bread and wine for you, for the forgiveness of sin. And when a believing community is restoring each other, Jesus promises to be there. Emmanuel, God is with us!

Reformation, be great in the kingdom! Become little children. Welcome other little children. Seek those who are lost. Restore one another. Forgive one another. In these things, Jesus promises to be with you.

**In Jesus Name,
Amen**