

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 24, 2017
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Matthew 18:12-20

"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? 13) And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. 14) In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. 15) "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."**

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus:

The day at the fair I was walking along the midway and suddenly I realized that the rest of family wasn't right behind me anymore. I looked here and there amongst the people but couldn't see Barb and Joanna any where. It was just a few seconds but suddenly I felt all alone even though there were lots of people around me. Soon the crowd of people passed and there behind them walking by themselves were Barb and Joanna.

We all have probably experienced situations where we felt all alone even though there were lots of people around us. When we have a personal problem we're trying to cope with we might feel all alone even though we're surrounded by co-workers. If a child gets separated from their parents in a crowd they might feel all alone even though there are lots of people all around them. Perhaps when we have sinned we feel all alone too – our guilt weighs heavily on us – but maybe we're too ashamed to confess that sin to anyone or maybe we feel like no one would really care. In those lonely times the child of God can find comfort from the assurance that: **Jesus is There With Us.** 1. He is concerned about those who sin. 2. He reaches out to sinners through us. 3. He promises his answers to our prayers.

The fact that Jesus is concerned about those who sin is one of the reasons why a person feels guilt – our consciences remind us that God knows even our secret sins. One of the reasons a person feels uncomfortable about sin is because sin places a person under the curse of God. Our conscience knows that we deserve to be punished for our sins. Under those circumstances, it might not be the most comforting thought to know that Jesus is concerned about our sins. In fact, it is quite common for people to turn God into the enemy under those circumstances. That's what Adam and Eve did in the garden of Eden, isn't it?

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When God came seeking them out to express his concern over sin they tried to hide from him in fear. But thankfully for them and for us God came to them with the promise of a rescue from punishment – he promised them a Savior from sin. Because of that, we no longer have to try to hide from God when we sin. In fact we can confess our sins with the confidence that they will be forgiven. Sadly we often forget that fact. Jesus' Parable of the lost sheep helps put things in perspective for us – reminding us that Jesus shows his concern for those who sin by lovingly searching for us and bringing us back into his fold.

If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? 13) And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. 14) In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

Jesus describes the sinner as a sheep who wanders away – that's a great description of what happens to many people even Christians. They simply wander off following first this sin, then another and then another until they have a hard time understanding how they got so far away from the Lord and his gracious care. In Jesus' parable, Jesus talks about a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep behind to look for the one sheep that is lost and wandering. Even before we ever come to realize that we are wandering away the Lord Jesus is concerned about us and for us. The Bible teaches us that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. It also teaches us that Jesus came to seek and to save sinners. In his grace the Lord Jesus made us part of his flock by calling us to faith through the Gospel – but because we still have a sinful nature we at times are more ready to listen to the call of sin and the devil than we are to the call of the Gospel and our Good Shepherd. We wander off and we fall into sin. But we're not alone. Jesus is there when we sin and is waiting to pick us up and carry us back home where we belong.

When you and I see and understand the Lord's concern about sin and his love for the sinner we'll share that same concern. Simply because we understand the joy of forgiveness, we'll be willing to reach out to sinners to call them back to the Lord.

The parable of the lost sheep reminds us that our father in heaven is not willing for any of his little ones to be lost. That means that we also have a responsibility to those who are caught up in sin. Jesus talks about that responsibility in our text. **"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.** In other words we are to do the very same thing that the shepherd did in Jesus parable and that Jesus did for us. We are to reach out to the one who sinned.

This is a different way of looking at things – our human nature would do just the opposite. By nature we're more likely to tell other people about someone's sin that we are to tell them. And

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if we do talk to someone else about their sin – often our purpose is not to win them over but to express our anger or disappointment in them. And how likely is it that we would take the initiative in reaching out to the one who sinned even if we're willing to forgive them. Isn't it more likely that we'll adopt the attitude that they'll have to come crawling back to us if they want our forgiveness. And how often doesn't it happen that we're willing to ignore or hide someone's sin rather than lovingly confront them with it.

It is only when we look at things in the same way as Jesus that we'll understand that it is a loss whenever someone wanders away from the Lord and his church through sin. Love and concern for the lost will compel us to reach out to them first to show them their sin so that we can win them back. And that same love and concern will not be diminished if our brother refuses to listen to us. Jesus continues: **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.'**

Once again this isn't the natural thing to do, is it? It's it more natural to say, "Well, I tried but he wouldn't listen so I guess there's nothing more I can do." Maybe Jesus parable of the lost sheep can help us put things into perspective. What would have happened if the man would not have been able to rescue his sheep by himself? Don't you suppose he would have called for others to help him? Isn't that what happens when someone gets lost. First one person starts looking for them, soon the rest of the family joins the search and then the law enforcement agencies are notified and join the search and ultimately even the community at large including strangers will become part of a search party – working until the individual is found or until it becomes painfully clear there is no hope.

Jesus is applying that same principal to dealing with someone who has sinned. The person who refuses to acknowledge their sin is lost – their impenitence is a dangerous sign of unbelief and impending doom. That's why Jesus encourages us to continue our efforts – taking along one or two other individuals who will be able to join us in showing the sinner his fault. Perhaps they will be convinced of their sin by the others. But if they refuse to listen to them – then the others will join you in yet another effort to win the brother back. You might make repeated efforts but if it appears that you are not able to make any progress you may have to call in additional help. That's what Jesus has in mind when he says: **If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.**

Now once again this isn't the easy thing to do – it's much easier for a congregation just to ignore the sin of one individual. It might be easier but it's not wiser. That's what the apostle Paul had to tell the Corinthians when they refused to reach out to rescue one of the members of their congregation from sin. In order to help them understand the importance of taking the appropriate steps in dealing with those who live in sin Paul asked this question: **Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?** (1 Corinthians 5:6)

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Just a little bit of yeast goes a long way when it comes to baking – normally that's a good thing. But what if you wanted to bake something without yeast – for example the unleavened bread that God asked his people to use to celebrate the Passover meal? Then even a little bit of yeast would ultimately ruin the whole batch of dough. That's why the Jewish people would sweep out their homes and wipe out their cupboards before baking their bread for the Passover. They didn't want to risk contaminating their Passover bread.

Ultimately those who refuse to repent of their sins contaminate the whole congregation – just as an infection can spread from one part of a body to another. That is why ultimately Jesus instructs the congregation to take action when someone repeatedly refuses to repent of their sin: **if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.**

Throughout this entire section the Lord Jesus has been expressing his concern for the lost but Jesus also understands that sadly there will be some who refuse to listen to the testimony of their Christian friends and the word of the Lord. In such a situation the church has no choice but to acknowledge that such an individual has separated himself from the church. He has become an unbeliever and should be regarded as such. And again it's important to remember how Jesus treated such individuals as the pagans and tax collectors: he prayed for them and reached out to them. And so Jesus words remind us that those who have refused to repent of their sins and have been lovingly excommunicated from the church need the love of Christ more than ever. And so efforts will continue as possible to use the Law and the Gospel to bring the person to acknowledge his sin and trust in Jesus for forgiveness. When through the Law and the Gospel Christ's church withholds forgiveness from the impenitent and grants forgiveness to the penitent; what the church does on earth is in perfect agreement with God's will and therefore Jesus assures us: **"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.**

The task of confronting sin is one of those tasks that may seem very lonely even when it is done as part of a group – but Jesus assures us that he is there with us as he reaches out to sinners through us. And that's why we can be confident of his answers to our prayers as we carry out this ministry of love. **"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."**

When someone sins we are to go and rebuke; we are to take others along; we are to tell the congregation: all the while imploring the blessing of the heavenly Father who **is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.** As brothers and sisters in Christ we are to pray with a united mind and spirit – one that seeks God's will. We'll pray for the ability to deal with sinners in a loving way. We'll ask to be given the appropriate words to say. We'll pray that the

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Spirit will use our words to touch the sinners heart. We'll pray confident that the Father will grant our prayers which are in keeping with his will.

Already at the time of the sin Jesus was there – the sin was against him. All through the process of seeking after the one who had sinned Jesus was there with us and was also seeking. When the sinner repents Jesus is there to offer his forgiveness through our proclamation of the Gospel. And because Jesus is with his Church the one who rejects the ministry of the Church is really rejecting Jesus while the one who receives the forgiveness of the church is receiving the forgiveness of Jesus himself.

It's important to put this text into the proper perspective – by including Jesus' parable of the lost sheep we have been reminded that this text is simply showing us a plan for seeking the lost. All of the actions that Jesus outlined for us are acts of love and concern. We can carry them out because Jesus is there with us and has expressed his concern over sin by offering his life as the payment for our sins. Assured of his forgiveness it is our desire to share that forgiveness with others and Jesus is there with us to reach out to sinners through us. Amen.