Sermon by Pastor Tim O’Shields, Zion Lutheran Church, Fairview, Montana

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Sermon based on the **Gospel Reading**:

**Matthew 18:15-20**

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. 16But 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. 17If 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. 18Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19Again, 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. 20For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

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Before Sermon, Let’s pray together:

Holy God, Creator Father, Redeemer Son, and Loving Spirit, we praise you for your goodness and grace. We praise you for your Word made flesh. Speak to us through your holy Word. Write your Word on our hearts. Walk with us in the world as we go out and spread the good news of your Word, and live in the ways that are pleasing to you. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

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The old camp song goes like this:

We are **one in the Spirit**, we are **one in the Lord**.

We are **one in the Spirit**, we are **one in the Lord**;

And we pray that all **unity** will one day be restored.

And they’ll know we are Christians by our **love**, by our **love**,

And they’ll know we are Christians by our **love**.

Now, hold the thought of this old camp song as we look at our Gospel passage.

We heard Jesus use the word “church” two times in this passage today. Now, listen again to verses from the Gospel passage on the last Sunday of August, Matthew 16:18-19:

**18**And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my **church**, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. **19**I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

In both passages, we hear the word “church”. Jesus did not invent the word “church”, although these are the first and only times that we hear him use the word in the whole of the Gospels. [There is a Hebrew equivalent to the word “church” that is used multiple times in the Hebrew texts of the Old Testament that describe gatherings for worship, study, prayer, and fellowship also. So, the word had been used before.] Why did Jesus use the word “church” now, and also, why did he use the words about binding and loosing in both these Scripture passages?

Without some deeper thought, one could think that Jesus was talking about the “church” in some way that would lead them/lead us to be a church that withdraws from the worldly world, so they/we could exist as a ‘safe church’. The worldly word is a place of sin, turmoil, deceit, division, and lack of faith in our God. One could think that a withdrawn church from the messiness of the world would be a safe place of faith and worship, where God’s presence could be, and be insulated from the evils of that world. For the disciples and for all of Jesus’ followers that heard his message, Jesus was NOT calling them to separate from the world that surrounded them to protect them, segregate them, or make them elite. Jesus was not calling them to be separated from the world to be the “church”—above the rest. He was not calling them to withdraw from the world to live and be with only people like them—other people of faith and of a common mission. No! Jesus made it clear throughout the Scriptures that we are to “go” into the world, to “reach out” into the world, and to proclaim the Good News, and to show God’s love—even with strangers! We are called to be church—out in the world—for the sake of the world.

That brings us to today’s passage. As the church, we are called to not only exist in the world, but to be there as the beacon of light, hope, and salvation for the world. When we are church FOR THE WORLD, we are able to show those outside our four walls WHO GOD IS. God is only seen through us and our outreach and presence, as individual believers and as the church. We have the calling and Christian responsibility to show the love, the grace, the mercy, the compassion, the goodness, and the SALVATION of our God, to the world. God’s mission can only be seen through us. We see the Father, only through our relationship with Jesus Christ, our Savior, and by the power of our ‘other’ Advocate, the Holy Spirit. The love of Christ, and the power of the Spirit can only guide us and lead us as the church. We, the church, are called to take the mission of the Good News ‘to the ground’—**to engage** in God’s mission—**to do God’s work with our hands** in this worldly world **THAT WE ARE CALLED TO SERVE**.

We can only do this if we are a **unified and committed church** in the teachings of Christ, and the whole of God’s Word. The Gospel text today calls us to **unity and accountability**, as the church. Jesus is not simply telling us that we are to be a unified church and to have accountability as the church. No! Jesus is actually telling us **how to** do this. Jesus is showing us **how to** resolve conflict in the church. Now, how many of you have ever seen conflict, disagreements, divisions, or undercurrents in a church? I have personally served in ten congregations, and have never yet seen one that did not have some level of disagreement and division and undercurrents that needed resolution. When disagreement leads to **healthy dialogue**, which in turn leads to **understanding** (maybe **mutual negotiation and compromise**), then the disagreements do not fester and tend not to have the potential to result in divisions, if not worse. That is what Jesus is calling us to do here.

If you have a personal disagreement with a sister or brother “in the church”, we are counselled to come together and talk! We are called to try to resolve it! If that coming together results in resolution and a direction of unity, there has been Christian accountability in resolving that issue.

If the one-on-one approach falls short, then we are called to bring in others who can bring truth and light and accountability. And if that doesn’t work, then we are called to bring the issue(s) before the church at large for Christian accountability to be realized.

This often makes us uncomfortable. It makes us uncomfortable because it is usually easier to live in tension and disagreements (even with the undercurrents) than it is to **confront** another sister or brother. If we are to have unity as the church, then we cannot be in constant turmoil and conflict. There must be resolution! **Conflict resolution** is part of our lesson here and Jesus is showing us exactly how to do it. Jesus, even says what we should do if, after the large group intervention does not result in resolution. If the large group intervention fails, Jesus says that we are to consider the offender(s) to be like a pagan or a tax collector (a dreaded tax collector in that culture and time) and to move forward without them.

No one can argue that hatred, extremism, and lack of ability to talk and compromise have created hard lines in our country and our world that have resulted in deep, and seemingly, irreversible divisions among people(s). Our passage today is calling us to be a church of people who are recognized and identified to live in harmony, tolerance, and in unity. This example can be called the Christian example. It can be an example to people in all places of life in the worldly world: communities, cities, governments, and all kinds of organizations. When we, the church, are **known by who we are** **as Christians** that live in unity and in Christ’s love, we are following the teachings and examples that Christ shows us today.

Okay, now remember the camp song again:

We are **one in the Spirit**, we are **one in the Lord**.

We are **one in the Spirit**, we are **one in the Lord**;

And we pray that all **unity** will one day be restored.

And they’ll know we are Christians by our **love**, by our **love**,

And they’ll know we are Christians by our **love**.

A unified church that has its foundation in the love of Christ, and that exists for the sake of the world IS WHO WE ARE. It is our very identity as the church. We should be easily recognized by this **AS WHO WE ARE!!!** As the song calls us to do: **they will know we are Christians by our love.**

When we work together in harmony, and are bound by the love of Christ by bonds that cannot be broken by the worldly world, then we can be a genuine example for others—with, by, and through Christ.

When we, the church, are broken and compromised by petty disagreements and destructive undercurrents to God’s will and mission, then there is no way we can be any kind of example to anyone. We will not experience the fullness of God without unity and the bonds of love. Jesus knows this! That is why Jesus so clearly shows us today in this passage how to overcome those things, issues, petty disagreements that can cause us, the church (Christian believers) to be unappealing and even uninviting to others in the world who are hungering and thirsting for peace and love.

Then Jesus puts it all in perspective with his counsel of **accountability**. “Whatever you bind on earth, will be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth, will be loosed in heaven.” We are responsible for our actions and for our inactions. That accountability of our lives in this worldly world is know to God in the heavenly place. We are called to do the work of God in this world in a unified approach—God’s work—our hands. There is no escaping of accountability in the call of God, through Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit—to unity, mission, love, and outreach.

Now, real bottom line is the Good News of Jesus Christ. As we live and grow in this world, even as God’s children, we will often stumble and fall. We will often “sin, and fall short of the glory of God.” God is always there is pick us up, dust us off, forgive us, and be there the next time we stumble and fall. The Good News and the promise of Christ is:

We are saved by **GRACE ALONE**,

THROUGH **FAITH ALONE**,

IN **CHRIST ALONE**,

ACCORDING TO THE **HOLY SCRIPTURES ALONE**,

and TO THE **GLORY OF GOD ALONE**!

God loved us so much that he gave his only Son to die, so that whoever believes in him, will not perish, but will have everlasting life. (John 3:16) This is the Good News. AND… the fullness of our lives as **saved** children of God, calls us to live as individuals, families, and **THE CHURCH** in **the unity and love of Jesus Christ**. Amen!