

Trinity XIV, 2026 (September 6th)

Matt. 18:15-20; Ezek.33:7-11; Romans 13:8-end.

If a brother or sister sins....

I start this morning with an apology, an apology for *not* preaching on something Jesus said in that reading.

‘Truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.’

If two of you agree about anything you ask God for, it will be done for you.

Well. There may be some way in which that is a true and sensible thing to say, but I have not found it. I find sayings like that bewilderingly difficult, and I know I’m not the only one.

We can have that conversation afterwards if you like. However, I’m not preaching on it today because it’s not really the main thrust of the reading, it’s not really what that Matthew passage is *about*. No, this morning we’ve got the rather different question: what do you do when another Christian sins?

What do you do when someone sitting here in church is mean to you? What if you know they’re having an affair? What if they’re a bit racist, or have their hand in the till, or are sleazy, or tell some outrageous lie about you? Unfortunately, these are not theoretical questions.

How to answer them?

Well, first something today’s passage doesn’t say, but which the rest of the Gospel definitely does. Be very careful. Be careful before you start to correct someone else, that you’re not doing the same kind of thing or worse. Jesus was pretty stern about those who offered to clear specks from other people’s eyes, whilst ignoring the log in their own. And be careful about that instinct, which many of us have, to be fiercely critical of others. Judge not, lest ye be judged. The measure you give will be the measure you get. Let him who has no sin cast the first stone. There are few things more spiritually dangerous, it seems, than offering moral commentary on other people’s lives. A lot of the time, you would do well to stay quiet.

That’s especially the case, by the way, if the wrong-doer’s principal offence is to bruise your ego. Maybe if someone’s told a lie about you, or been rude to you, or hurt you, the primary question to ask is not – how do I make sure they pay for that? How do I make sure justice is done? But, how do I get over myself, and love them anyway? That’s what turning the other cheek means.

In many situations, all that is very good advice. Today's readings, however, say something else – something which doesn't quite contradict everything I've just said, but which certainly balances it.

You see, the risk of all that good advice – be careful, don't judge, suck it up – is that it very easily slides into something else. Who cares? Who cares about that person? Who cares what they did? That's their business. Their problem. Just leave them to it. You get on with your life, they get on with theirs, you don't have to have anything to do with them. It's not as if they're family.

That is sometimes tempting advice.

The problem is though, we *are* family. The translation of the reading did us disservice this morning when it talked about 'another member of the church' sinning. The actual Greek text says 'brother'. Our translators were trying not to be sexist, so they said 'member of the church', but they should really have said 'brother or sister'. We are brothers and sisters. If you're baptized, you're family. Perhaps even closer than family – think of what we say at every communion, Paul's words: we being many are one body, because we all share in one bread. *One body*. All of us together. How would it make sense for your leg, for instance, to say 'oh yes, I know the arm is full of poison. I know it's rotting away. But that's not my problem. It's nothing to do with me.' No. We belong together, and what's hurting one hurts all.

In moral and spiritual terms, this means sin is never private. Sin is never private. If one of us is morally diseased, if one of us is a sleaze-bag, or a racist, or a thief, or a liar, it damages all of us. It's a corruption of the body of which we are part. An infection in the common blood-stream. Which is why the Bible – as well as saying be careful, don't judge, be generous, suck it up – *also says* we can't ignore each other's sin.

It's there in the first reading, from Ezekiel: if the prophet doesn't warn the people, God says, their blood will be on his hands.

It's there in the second reading, from Romans: we're to love one another. *Love*, not ignore, not tolerate. To love someone is to do what's good for them, which – sometimes – correcting, challenging, exposing. Surgeons love people when they rip poisonous things out of them: well, the same sort of thing is sometimes required in the spiritual life.

It's there most obviously in Matthew. Go to the offender, says Jesus. Speak to them privately. If that doesn't work, bring witnesses. If that doesn't work, bring it before the whole church. The answer is never, just don't worry about it. It's not your affair. No. Everybody's sin, is everybody's business.

Now how exactly one puts all of this into practice, I don't know. I wouldn't especially want, during the notices say, to have people dragged out from the congregation to be accused in public, or to do some kind of public repentance. There's been a lot of that kind of thing in church history, and it's awful, and the scope for abuse is just horrendous. People are very, very good at throwing stones, or burning others for their own good. We must not go there, and perhaps we'll never be spiritually mature enough not to. How to love each other in this honest, tough, really dealing with each other's sin sense - not just tolerating each other, or indulging each other, but holding each other to account and making each other better – is a really difficult problem. But the one option the Gospel rules out is giving up, and saying that we don't really belong to each other. We're family.

But what, you might say, about that last bit in the Gospel reading? You've done the private conversation. You've involved the two or three witnesses. Finally, you've brought the offender before the whole church. He *still* refuses to listen, he still doesn't change. He's proud, stubborn, unbending – what then? 'Let such a one be to you as a Gentile or a tax-collector.' Phew. At last, it seems, we can kick someone out. At last, we can refuse to have anything to do with them. They've put themselves outside. Cue huge sighs of relief.

Except... it's tricky, isn't it? 'Let them be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector.' What do we know about Gentiles and tax-collectors in Matthew's Gospel? Well, they're the ones whom Jesus keeps bringing in. Treating well. Eating with. Being friends. Indeed, sometimes, even suggesting that there's more of God in their company than there is among the righteous. Let them be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector. Let them be to you ... the special object of your love? Let them be to you... the people where God takes you by surprise? It's a puzzling ending. It holds things open. It would be a brave hearer of Jesus, it would be a stupid hearer of Jesus, who heard the words 'let them be to you as a Gentile or a tax-collector' and said to himself, 'not my brother or sister after all then. Not someone to be loved. Not someone to be rescued.'

No, my friends, the wonderful but difficult truth is that God never, ever, ever gives up on any of us. Which is wonderful, because it really means us. Which is difficult, because it really means everyone else too. He never, ever, gives up – so we cannot do so either.

To our God, the patient, loving, inexhaustible God who alone gets justice and mercy right, to him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.