

Exodus 12:1-14 “I AM [the name too holy to speak].”

Romans 13:8-14 “Love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Matthew 18:15-20 “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Emmanuel Church Sin

O God of justice, grant us the wisdom, the strength and the courage to seek always and everywhere after truth, come when it may, and cost what it will.

Often on the Sunday of Labor Day weekend at Emmanuel Church we have a sermon about the honor of human labor, the rights of workers to be treated with respect, and the need to come together to expose and correct work-related injustices. Given the state of our economy with regard to employment, preaching about that seems more pressing than ever. And yet, that is not what I want to preach about this morning. What I want to preach about this morning is sin – and in particular, Church sin – because, as I am fond of saying, there is no sin like Church sin. There seems to be no end to corrupt religious systems that ostracize, victimize and dehumanize¹ beloved children of God in the name of Jesus. But I don’t want to preach about other church’s sin, or even the historical church’s sin (because frankly, we just don’t have the time). I want to preach about sin in this gathered community: Emmanuel Church sin. Why I would want to do that on my first Sunday back from vacation, I do not know!

We have before us, from the Gospel of Matthew, what is known as the passage on church discipline; and I’m thinking that it has something to teach us. First I want to offer some perspective, some context and definition. These six verses are in the middle of the 18th chapter of Matthew which is the fourth sermon or teaching (out of five) delivered by Jesus. This is the sermon about how to get along with one another with sincere discipleship in community – and particularly what to do when you notice someone not hitting the target behavior for life in community. The word that we translate as “sin” is literally “missing the mark.” It is an archery term that gets used figuratively to describe errant behavior like falling short, overshooting, going astray, you get the idea.

The set up for this instruction is fourteen verses about caring for the most vulnerable in the community. Matthew writes that as Jesus began to preach this sermon he called a child over to himself and said, “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” According to Jesus, the most humble folks are the greatest in the realm of God. Furthermore, anyone who scandalizes them or trips them up would be better off not living. The most vulnerable are God’s most precious, so treat them well, look after them, if they stray, rejoice when they return. “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father.” Ironically, these fourteen verses are never read in our Sunday lectionary. (It’s not that you missed hearing them last week because of the tropical storm.)

The unstated complaint that Jesus seems to be addressing next is about the misbehavior that hurts the community – that tears apart the fabric of the assembly – the ekklesia – also

¹Thanks to Helen Bruch Pearson for this powerful list. See her book, *Do What You Have the Power to Do: Studies of Six New Testament Women* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1992), p. 10.

translated as the church. His response is a reminder that the offender is a brother. While “member of the church” is a reasonable translation, what gets lost is the sense of intimate relationship being addressed here. If your brother misses the mark, Jesus says, take him aside and tell him privately. The words “against you” here – as in, if your brother sins against you – are a later manuscript addition. This instruction is not necessarily limited to the victim – it includes anyone who notices that someone else has missed the mark. However, keep in mind Jesus’ instruction earlier in Matthew’s Gospel about removing the log from your own eye before you attempt to get a sliver out of another’s eye. So, take the offender aside and tell him privately. If he listens to you – what’s implied here is that he comprehends and is willing to amend his behavior – then you have profited. Let’s imagine that the word brother really includes brothers and sisters. If you’ve taken your sister aside and told her how her errant behavior is damaging the well-being of the community and she doesn’t listen, tell her again with two or three witnesses with you. And if she or he still doesn’t listen, let the assembly know. If he or she refuses to listen even to the whole assembly, let him or her be to you as the non-Jew and the tax collector.

That sounds justifiably dismissive – what else could possibly be required of the community? It sounds that way until we remember what Matthew says about Jesus and tax collectors and other sinners, which is that he dined with them, he reclined with them, he was a friend to them, and that they were surely going to heaven ahead of the son who says he’ll work in the vineyard but doesn’t go. The Apostle Matthew (in whose name this Gospel is written) was a tax collector. Now maybe he stopped doing that work at some point, but Matthew is not described as the former tax collector. So perhaps what we have here is a proof text for open communion. And in case we think that the authority to bind and loose judgment somehow justifies – you know – makes righteous decisions to exclude folks from the assembly, in verse twenty-one, an exasperated Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive (in other words, how many times should I cancel a relational debt)? As many as seven times?” And Jesus said to him, “not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times (in other words, more times than you can count).”

Okay, you might be thinking, but Emmanuel Church doesn’t exclude people from the table or from participation in the community. Everyone is welcome here and we don’t make people pay their relational debts. True. That is not where we, as a community, miss the mark as far as I can tell. Our church sin, if you will, has to do with our lack of discipline when it comes to responding to individual behavior that tears at the fabric of the community. And Jesus’ offering is a protocol that promotes dignity, collaboration, and accountability in order to build up the community. The goal of every step is reconciliation and restored relationship:

- Dignity is promoted when your brother misses the mark and you tell him in private. You honor him by letting him know that he has injured you or the community and allowing him to save face. Perhaps he doesn’t know that he missed the mark. Perhaps he knows but he doesn’t comprehend the damage that you see or feel. A private and direct conversation is the first step in restoring the breach.
- Collaboration is promoted when your sister disagrees or ignores your private plea and so you enlist two or three others in the conversation to talk with her again. Note well that Jesus’ instruction is *not* to go tell two or three others about how your sister has disregarded your concern, without including her in the

conversation. The point of this step of including others is not to gang up on someone – it’s about getting some additional perspectives and demonstrating the seriousness of the breach. It’s also about getting some additional perspectives and help in the restoration process. Remember this whole teaching is set in the context of compassion for those who are vulnerable, for those who are at risk.

- Accountability is promoted when two or three have not been able to persuade the errant sister or brother, and the situation is brought before the assembly. Now honestly, I don’t know how this would work and the idea of it makes me feel a little queasy. However, I think if we could just start practicing the first and second steps in order, either we would have time to figure this step out or we just wouldn’t need it after all! In any case, I’m sure that the power to bind and to loose is given to the whole assembly and not to any individual.

Our Emmanuel Church sin, as I see it, has to do with not taking the integrity of our community seriously enough – of not valuing the people in it enough to engage in the difficult conversations directly, or of nursing grudges, of tolerating destructive behavior, or of simply walking away and vowing to not interact again with the brother or sister who has fallen short, or overshot, or gone astray – who has let you down or stepped on your toes, or let the community down or stepped on the community’s toes. Is this ringing any bells with you? (I’m saying these things to you all because I love you and I missed you! I’ve returned with a renewed energy for growing our capacity to live more fully into the promise of Emmanuel – God with us.)

Jesus was not inventing something new here. He was reminding the community of the Torah instruction in Leviticus (19:17-18) that says “you will reprove your neighbor or you will incur guilt yourself. You will not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” He must have known that this sounds impossibly difficult, so like any great preacher, Jesus makes some very bold statements here. “If two of you agree,” he says, “if two of you ‘are in symphony’ with what you ask, it’s done for you by my father in heaven. If two or three are gathered in my name [the word here is synagogue] I will be in the middle of you.” Neither of these two promises is provable of course.

So it seems to me that this is where grace comes in – the unearned blessing of Divine forgiveness (which works even when we cannot or do not forgive); the unearned blessing of the Holy One which enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, strengthens our wills, and increases our appetite for reconciliation, so that when all else fails, we dine with sinners because we are no better or worse than anyone else. So after our prayers today, let’s eat.