

The Twenty-Second Sunday after Trinity | St. Matthew 18:15-22  
October 23, 2016 | Saude & Jerico Lutheran Churches

**In Nomine Iesu**

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O almighty, eternal God: We confess that we are poor sinners and cannot answer one time out of a thousand, when You contend with us; but with all our hearts we thank You, that You have taken all our guilt from us and laid it upon Your dear Son Jesus Christ, and made Him to atone for it. We pray, graciously sustain us in faith, and so govern us by Your Holy Spirit, that we may live according to Your will, in neighborly love, service and helpfulness, and not give way to wrath or revenge, that we may not incur Your wrath, but always find in You a gracious Father; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH, p. 164)

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)*

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*The sermon text for this morning is taken from the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, beginning with the fifteenth verse. We read as follows in Jesus' name:*

[Jesus said:] "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." / Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." (ESV)

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, our Brother, who has reconciled us with our Father in heaven, dear fellow redeemed:

The command to "love your neighbor as yourself," means to love those who are close to you, the people you come in contact with. For many of us, our closest neighbors live in our own home—our parents, siblings, spouse, children. These are our neighbors. But loving them is not always so easy. In truth it is often easier to have a good attitude toward people we rarely see than it is to love the people who live with us. Brothers and sisters verbally and physically fight with each other; tempers flare between parents and children; spouses give each other the cold shoulder. But despite these difficulties, most families would rather be together than separate. Why is that?

One reason is that our family is stuck with us. And there is comfort in that. Friends and acquaintances change through the years, but the family bond lasts. We share the same background with the members of our family, the same traditions, the same memories and

experiences. We know about one another's high and low points, which helps to establish mutual trust. Having family means we are not alone. God has put others in our life to care for us, help us, and encourage us.

The same things we appreciate about our families are also true of the Church. In the Christian Church, God brings together people who have a common heritage of sin and struggle, but also a common reliance on the grace and forgiveness of Jesus. They may not be similar in their DNA, but they are united by something even deeper and more profound. **You and Your Spiritual Siblings Share the Same Blood.**

## I

Just as a parent might warn her child to stay away from a cliff, or a sister might reprimand her brother for bad choices, so God gives us spiritual siblings to look out for us. In today's sermon text, Jesus says, *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault."* Jesus is not talking here about your brother by birth (though that could apply too). He is talking about your spiritual brother, your fellow believer. You have a responsibility toward other Christians like you have a responsibility toward the members of your family.

While we always want to be charitable toward others, sometimes "charity" is an excuse to hide from the difficult work of warning a fellow Christian about sin. Such a "charitable attitude" can sound like this: "I know my nephew should not move in with his girlfriend, but you know kids these days. It's not really my place to say anything." Or, "I don't like the way my friend gossips, but who am I to judge?" This is not actually charity, but a lack of courage and love. That does not mean we should approach these difficult situations like a trigger-happy kid who just caught a glimpse of his first deer. We do not open up with both barrels, but we should gently warn about sin and the destruction it leads to. The goal is not to make ourselves look or feel better, but to coax a brother or sister toward self-reflection and repentance.

That is one reason why the Lord gathers His people into congregations. Each of us is equally sinful, and our natural tendency is to see our own sins as less serious than the sins of others. If we stopped going to church—even if we kept reading our Bible—we would be tempted toward self-righteousness, because there would be no one around to keep our ego in check. It is like having a piece of food stuck on our face. We need someone to point it out to us to save us from further embarrassment. God brought us into the spiritual family of the church, so that we can watch out for one another and make sure no one is overcome by temptation and sin.

In Galatians 6, St. Paul writes about our obligation to our spiritual siblings: *"Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ"* (vv. 1-2). The only reason we would not do this, he says, is because we are too proud. Either we do not want to burden ourselves with the weaknesses of others, or we lack the humility to see that we are just as much in need of grace as anyone else.

It is an exercise of love to warn a brother or sister in Christ about their sin. We do not want them to remain in their sins and be damned. But there is a proper way to go about it. It does more harm than good to learn about your neighbor's sin, and then go blab it around to others. This is a violation of the Eighth Commandment as Martin Luther explains: "People are called

slanderers who are not content with knowing a thing, but go on to assume jurisdiction. When they know about a slight offense committed by another person, they carry it into every corner. They are delighted and tickled that they can stir up another's displeasure, just as swine delight to roll themselves in the dirt and root in it with the snout." (Large Catechism, para. 267).

Instead of this approach, Jesus says that when a fellow Christian does wrong, you should bring up the matter with him one-on-one. If there is no repentance, then you bring along one or two others who share the same concern for that person. If even that fails, the matter must be brought before the whole congregation. The purpose is not to drag a person's name through the mud but to lovingly call him to repent. But if he ignores the concern of his entire spiritual family, he shows that he is no longer one of them. Then Jesus says he must be treated as an outsider, one who has willfully removed himself from the rights and inheritance of God's family. The formal recognition of this status is called excommunication. The congregation will continue to pray for his repentance and visit with him. And if there is repentance in the future, the person will be welcomed again as a brother, just as though he had never left.

## II

When a congregation carries out these steps of discipline, Jesus makes it clear that He is the one who is acting: *"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."* What a great comfort this is! In a society in which wrong is praised as right, and bad is called good, it is difficult for an individual Christian or a congregation to speak the truth. It would be much easier to go along with the prevailing winds of change that constantly blow our way. And many so-called Christian churches have done this.

But the true Church of Jesus is a church in which every teaching of the Bible is cherished and confessed. Jesus calls the Church of all believers His own Body, and He is its Head. The Head controls the Body, so when a Christian congregation takes action according to His Word, it is His action. And there is nothing that Jesus asks the Church to endure that He did not endure Himself. He suffered as the Church suffers. He was tested as the Church is tested. He cried out in anguish as the Church does. He knows the pain of losing a spiritual brother, just like the Church knows it. But through all this pain and trouble and wickedness, He won for sinners eternal life with Him.

This promise and blessing from God is our entire motivation when dealing with spiritual siblings who have sinned. We want to be in heaven with them for all eternity. We have been united with them into one Body in Christ and therefore share the same blood—blood that keeps us alive, blood that pumps through our hearts and minds. This is the holy blood of Jesus, which *"cleanses us from all sin"* (1Jn. 1:7). Since we are drawn together by His blood into one spiritual family, our bond is not easily broken. It is a bond that transcends even family backgrounds and traditions. As the Letter to the Ephesians states, *"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.... [Y]ou are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God"* (2:13,19).

When you think about your past interactions with members of your spiritual family, you can probably think of times that you ignored a brother in need or spared yourself the discomfort of

addressing a sin. How often have you missed opportunities like these? Seven times? Seventy times seven? No matter how often you have failed in your responsibilities toward your neighbor, your heavenly Father forgives you. His Son Jesus is your Brother in the flesh. He took all your guilt and sin on Himself, and the Father charged Him in your place. Jesus was declared an outsider – excommunicated, if you will – and suffered the eternal flames of hell for you. *“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7).*

Now if God holds nothing against you, what can you hold against another? If God’s love for you knows no bounds, why should your love for your neighbor be any different? *“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10).* Love your fellow Christians like brothers and sisters. In Christ, that is just what they are. They are your spiritual siblings, purchased and won by the blood of Jesus. And more and more are still being added to this spiritual family – to the Body of Christ – every day. They are called by the same Word of grace, washed in the same cleansing Waters, and they eat the same holy Food as you do. And like you, they will be joined forever with the family of saints above, where we will all enjoy a glorious reunion in heaven.

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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We are God’s house of living stones,  
Builted for His habitation;  
He through baptismal grace us owns  
Heirs of His wondrous salvation;  
Were we but two His name to tell,  
Yet He would deign with us to dwell  
With all His grace and His favor. (#211, v. 3)