

Jesus' Pursuit of the Lost Sheep

Matthew 18:10-20

[10] "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. [12] What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? [13] And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. [14] So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

[15] "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. [16] 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. [17] 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. [18] 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. [19] 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. [20] For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." (ESV)

In the Name of Jesus, AMEN.

Our Gospel text this week began with Jesus' disciples asking the question "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" This is a question that the disciples continue to ask Jesus as various times as recorded in the Gospels, and even though He continues to answer it, they just don't seem to understand what He is saying fully. Jesus, again graciously turns their world upside down by answering that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is not the mighty, the strong or the powerful, but a child, a little one. This is how a person becomes a Christian, by gift or grace alone. This is completely the work and action of God alone. A child is one who is weak, dependent, and in need of constant care and nurturing, and throughout Chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel, within the context of answering this question, Jesus teaches His disciples and us how He cares for the child, the struggling one, and continues to do so, again and again and again. This is the way of the Gospel, the way of faith, the way of Jesus, and the life of One who has been baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

In further answering this question, Jesus speaks about going after the lost sheep, who has left the nurturing care of the shepherd and other sheep, but is pursued and found by the Good Shepherd, who, in His joy goes after this individual sheep personally.

[13] And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. [14] So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. – Matthew 18:13-14

Then, beginning in verse 15 Jesus speaks about restoring our brother or sister who is in need, who sins against another in the church, but again is still a child in need of help, a lost sheep, and Jesus says:

"[15] "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. [16] 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. [17] 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"

Since the Gospel is not understood by the natural man, born into sin and tainted more than we can comprehend with the effects of Original Sin, at first glance, we may be seeing this as a list or program on how we deal with people that wrong us. This is usually where we want to go with this section of the text, and unfortunately it has been devastatingly used as such throughout history, not bringing restoration and forgiveness, but bringing division, and actually further harming our brothers and sisters. Because of our sinful flesh, since the Fall, man has wanted to be like God, his own god, controlling and in charge. This not, however what Jesus is teaching here in the context of finding and restoring the lost sheep, our wayward brother or sister.

So, if Jesus is not teaching us how to fix a Christian who is troublesome or help us weed out the false Christians from the real ones, then what is Jesus giving us and His disciples here in this text? First of all, we remember the context is Jesus' love of the little ones, the child who is needy and in need of constant care, the 1 sheep in 99 who has gone astray that He goes after and then rejoices when He rescues it, because according to Jesus,

This then, must be about the restoration and work of the Spirit to actually go after the 1 sheep in 99 who has gone astray, the little child who, if this Word is received in faith, is actually the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, just as was the prodigal son whose father was so overjoyed at his return that he threw a huge feast and celebrated the return of His son.

With this in mind now hear Jesus' words again that, *"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."* Your brother or sister is the child, the lost sheep, because they are in need as they are caught in sin and even rejecting the grace of God, and yet this is who Jesus pursues and absolves, this is the forgiveness of sins, the Gospel. Lest we should still think that somehow, we are better than this erring or straying brother or sister, or that Jesus wants to catch this person and kick them out of the church, in speaking of the same thing, St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians in Ch. 6 reminds us:

"Galatians 6:1-2

[1] 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. [2] Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. "

This is crucial to understanding how we are to help our neighbor in the church. Our neighbor, when they are weak and resisting God's gifts. We are to help this brother in a spirit of gentleness, because the straying sheep is just like us, who only come to Jesus and the church by the work of the Holy Spirit.

We also find in our text that as we gather then, as even just 2-3 people or the entire church the same promise is true, that Jesus, the Good Shepherd who seeks lost sheep is actually present with us. It is Jesus Himself who gives the church the gift of Holy Absolution or the Office of the keys to forgive wayward and straying sheep"

"Matthew 18:18-20

[18] 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. [19] 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. [20] For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

Jesus is here with us, and He is truly present, delivering His Word of forgiveness, for it is His Body broken for the wayward sinner and His blood that was shed for the absolution of the lost sheep, the infant child, and the wayward church member as well as for the entire world. It is Jesus who is present as He promises here to speak through the office of a pastor, who absolves in the stead and by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the One who is forgiving the erring brother, and the one who has been sinned against, and the one who time and again has resisted Him. The declaration and reality of heaven's courtroom is brought to earth. His Word of forgiveness is brought right to you, to your ears. Jesus came, not for the self-sufficient, the strong or the mighty, but to seek and save that which is lost, and He hears and answers the prayers for those who have "fallen away" and He pursues them, sometimes even through you and me. For it is not through our own reason or strength that we believe or even have the ability to come to Jesus, but according to the catechism

"but the Holy Spirit has called you by the Gospel, enlightened you with His gifts, sanctified and kept you in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith; in which Christian Church He forgives daily and richly all sins to me and all believers, and at the last day will raise up me and all the dead, and will give to me and to all believers in Christ everlasting life. This is most certainly true."

In the name of Jesus, Amen.