**Sermon for SEPTEMBER 10, 2023 Matthew 18:15-20 “An Agreeable Church”**

*Jesus said, “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. But 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. If 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. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”*

I have literally lost track of the number of times I have said to you, in this text and other texts like it in the gospels, that a discussion of binding and loosing, as riveting as it is, will have to wait for another time. Too much to talk about here…a sermon for another day. I said it thirteen years ago in 2011 when this text came up, and skirted it again in 2014, 2017, and 2020. But now, at last, the other day we have been saving for is here, and we *finally* get to talk about this pivotal biblical idea of binding and loosing.

Let me set this gem in its proper setting: Jesus is teaching about how we manage to get along with one another in this world. Timeless advice, right? In today’s teaching, Jesus offers a wonderful system of resolving conflict and coming into agreement with one another again. Although time-tested and effective, it is infrequently used, because using it requires a measure of courage and maturity that we sometimes lack. It would be worth it in every way to learn a bit more courage and a bit more maturity, even if the *only reason* was to apply this teaching. Because this is the kind of teaching that can change the world…

Jesus’ system is incremental in nature…it starts small, right where we are. So, if a brother or sister in the faith sins against you, he says, the first thing you do is talk to them about it, one on one. We notice right away that this is designed for conflict resolution between believers, but I think it functions pretty well among people of all walks of life who have a similar ethical foundations. The healing begins with a conversation, and the point of the conversation is reconciliation. And here is where the aforementioned courage and maturity come into play…courage to address the conflict face to face, and maturity to keep the conversation on track. This isn’t about proving our point, venting our spleen, or getting our way. It is about *resolving the disagreement.* It needs to happen soon after the original displeasure, not months and years after we have stewed in our own juices, ranted about it on Facebook, and had time to text all of our friends and marshal their support. A whole lotta big problems would never *become* big problems if we simply addressed them early and with a desire for healing that was larger than our desire for trouncing.

Yet, here's the good news; many, many people will respond to this method, but not all…so, if the personal approach is not successful, it’s time for the next step. The testimony of two or three witnesses was an age – old balancing factor, even when Jesus taught it, and it still works. Again, it must not be for ganging up, for reinforcing our rightness and someone else’s wrongness, but as an aid to reconciliation. Two heads really are better than one, and four, while more complicated, can also see more angles and propose more solutions. With four we have a better chance to steer ourselves back on course and into each other’s good graces again.

This next part is where Jesus leaves his tradition behind, and branches out into new territory – the next venue for an unresolved conflict is taking it to the whole church. If the one-on-one approach didn’t work, and the small group didn’t settle things, it’s time for the wisdom of the many. We seldom have the courage or maturity to get this far; more often, the offending person just stomps off with their woundedness rather than face what they assume will be a judgmental mob. It’s sad, really; because the church *can be* at its finest when it is negotiating a graceful solution to a thorny problem. I am put in mind of a little country church I served in rural southern Ohio. And in these tiny churches, strong personalities rule the roost. And so it was shocking and disturbing and nearly scandalous when the granddaughter of the church matriarch became pregnant out of wedlock. Here in California in 2023, teen pregnancy has lost a lot of the abusive stigma it used to have, but this was in the early 1990’s in middle America: this was a big flippin’ deal. Grandma was the lay leader; the girl’s mom was very active too, and the girl was in our youth group. What would the church’s response be to this radical departure from appropriate behavior? Praise God for United Methodist Women, who with grace and thoughtfulness embraced this lost child, made sure she got good prenatal care, and threw her a baby shower in the social hall! And we all discovered the healing possibility suggested by Jesus, whose wisdom teaches us that moving through the conflict *together* can bring everyone closer, can make everyone stronger.

But if it doesn’t, there is a final step, the releasing of that relationship. It used to bother me a lot more than it does now, when church folks, usually with a lot less process than Jesus suggested, removed themselves from the body. It still bothers me, but not so much, because God’s plan includes lots and lots of resting and roosting places, not just the one we currently call home. If best efforts are made, and resolution is not achieved, there is an escape clause. And even then, we are not truly done with one another, for by the time Peter and Paul got done developing the early church, even the pagans and the tax collectors were loved and welcomed, right? That’s what made the new kingdom of God different from what wasn’t working so well…it put *people* in the center, not principles or preachments.

Which brings us, at last, to this rabbinic notion of binding and loosing. This practice requires even *more* maturity and courage from the church, but it is also, arguably, the fullest flowering of our co-creative powers. If I were ever to write a book, it would be about this verse, this neglected, underused verse, where Jesus gives us authority to amend and even to determine the rules, based on what we have learned together and how we want the world to be. Binding and loosing is the gift of a respectful God who welcomes our buy-in and values our coherent opinions and understandings. It is the most profound Love that offers the reins of Life itself to us.

What is this? Simply stated, it is group interpretation of the right way to go in a given human situation. Come back for a moment with me to Ohio thirty years ago, and marvel at that group of women who interpreted the right way to go in a challenging human situation. They could have scorned the girl, shamed her mother, turned their backs on her grandma, but they discerned that the right way to go was the way of compassion. With binding and loosing we are gifted by Jesus with the awesome power once held by the rabbi’s only, the ability to thoughtfully, responsibly, prayerfully, faithfully chart our own course, and the promise that God will honor that process. It is the sharing of power and responsibility among *all* the believers, not just the ordained or the holier than thou. A few caveats are in place: this is not an individual imperative, this is a group decision process. Checks and balances, right? But wherever two or three are gathered, Jesus promises to be among us, and if he is among us in spirit and truth, then what we decide in good faith will be acceptable to God.

The history of this principle and its use and misuse could unspool for many hours, and sincerely, we do not *remotely* agree, across Christendom, about what should be bound up and what should be turned loose. But even that is okay. Notice it *doesn’t* say, wherever several million are gathered, and all in complete agreement, I might show up! God is big enough, comprehensive enough, total enough to absorb our current faithfulness, wherever it is, however it is, if it is expressed with integrity, conviction, and humility. Back to Ohio, once more, where a group of Christian folk chose to absorb that little girl’s current level of faithfulness. She knew that getting pregnant was a huge price to pay for a few moments of pleasure; she knew that the preferred way was still several years down the road for her; she was not proud or arrogant, but humble, understanding that many, many people showed her love where they might have chosen to show her hate. They absorbed her choice and encouraged her to do better down the road. They loosened a traditional value to teach a bigger value.

And so, a few examples: as we think about binding and loosing, we need not denigrate women, as some parts of the Bible clearly imply or outright teach. We need not draw artificial lines among God’s children based on different skin colors, as some parts of the Bible clearly imply or outright teach. We need not ostracize one another because our understandings of God differ, or our devotion to Jesus differs, or our understandings of the Holy Spirit differ, as some parts of the Bible clearly imply or outright teach. In our own church life, we have wrestled and wrangled and prayed and wept and ultimately concluded that God loves *all of us*, not just the heterosexual ones. And I surely believe that Jesus’ promise is true, and that what we have bound and loosed here on earth is honored by God in heaven.

I leave you with an idea that will be liberating to some and disturbing to others, but here it is: the Bible, as holy and revered as it has been over the centuries, is like a photo album, filled with snapshots, moments of human understanding frozen in time. Binding and loosing is like being given a camera to take photos of what actually *is*, right now, rather than just looking at tintypes from ages past. It is not that those older images aren’t or weren’t true, but they reflect a human understanding limited by time and space and knowledge, just as ours is. Here’s an easy example: I have seen pictures of Christina as a little girl, and I love them, but not as much as I love pictures of her as a proud mom, or a life-changing therapist, or a happy spouse! Binding and loosing allows us to *take more snapshots*, to update the look and feel of our faith in responsible, authentic ways. It is, hands down, the greatest gift of grace, full stop. May this gift of God flow between us, and among us, and through us, and *as us,* now and forevermore. Amen.