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Matthew 18:15-20

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

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As I was preparing for this week's message, the opening line of a commentary on this text from Matthew said, "Wherever two or more are gathered... it can be really hard to get along." I laughed at first when I read this, but then the more I thought about it, I realized how true of a statement this can be. Whether it is the tensions that we face in our relationships due to a different opinion on religion, politics, whose lives matter, the coronavirus, or whatever topic of the day is that we are discussing – all of us have probably experienced moments in our life when it is really hard to get along with others. Because the fact of the matter is – we're human – and we often do the very thing that we are trying so hard

not to do. Even though we are God's beloved children, we still fall into the temptation of sin where we don't put the needs of our neighbor above our own, and we only speak or act with our own interests in mind.

Perhaps that is why Jesus spent much of his time teaching the people what it meant to be a follower and disciple of Christ. He made it very clear what was expected of those who committed their lives to the ways of God's Kingdom (here are the highlights): love your enemies (5:44), deny yourself and take up your cross (16:24), to be great is to be a servant (23:11); practice forgiveness (18:21-22). Jesus' life, death and resurrection ushered in God's new kingdom, with the two basic commands to love God and love your neighbor. Through the sacrificial actions of Jesus, God's people were given the ability to be reconciled to God and one another.

And yet, when people of faith, read and study the same scriptures, and all share in the desire to live according to God's Word, we still disagree and there is bound to be conflict. So here in the heart of chapter eighteen we find these powerful words of Jesus regarding forgiveness: how important it is to God, how important it is to us, and how hard it can be to actually extend and receive it. I think we can all agree why it is so important to have the gift of forgiveness in our lives, whether that is from God or among each other – since every day we mess up, usually more than once. Whether out of insecurity, ignorance, bad habit, or something else, we all too often put our wants, needs, and desires ahead of those of others. And so we hurt the people around us. And they hurt us. You know what I'm talking about. It happens – even sometimes when we are trying to do something good.

However, that is not the end of the story – or our relationship with others. When conflict happens, there is always an opportunity for forgiveness and reconciliation to occur. Today's text from Matthew 18 demonstrates how we are

called to be in community and relationship with others – especially when we disagree or face conflict. How we, as God’s people, handle conflict with one another reflects what we believe about God to the world, which reminds me of a story I read a while ago:

Once there was a missionary who was traveling through the Amazon jungle going from tribe to tribe. On this particular day, the man entered a new tribe and was warmly received by the chief. The chief proceeded to escort the man around the tribe until he had the chance to meet each member of the community. The members of the tribe prepared a feast in honor of the man’s visit. Young and old, the entire tribe gathered down by the river. Overwhelmed by the welcome that he had received, everyone was enjoying the picnic. The young children were running and playing along the riverbank. Suddenly, an alligator jumped out of the water, bit the hand off of a child, and quickly receded back into the water. Several parents rushed to the child, and took the boy back to the village to treat his injury. Then as if nothing had happened, the festivities of the day continued. The missionary looked around, puzzled that few people seemed concerned over what happened. One girl who was tired from the sun beating down upon her became tempted by the cool water rushing by. She dipped her toe into the water when the alligator lunged and swallowed her entire foot. Again, a person standing by pulled the girl to safety, took her away for treatment, and the party picked up where it left off without even a mention of what had just occurred. At this, the man began to look more closely at the villagers. When he did, he saw that many of the people were missing hands, arms, legs... you name it, almost half of the people were missing some part of their body. Appalled by what he saw, he turned to the chief and said, “What is going on here. Why do your people continue to go near the water? Don’t they know about the alligator?” The chief turned to the man and said, “What alligator? We choose to not talk about what happens down by the river because it is too painful for us. To

talk about it would cause some people to relieve the pain that they have suffered, and so it is a rule in our tribe that no one is allowed to even mention this problem.”

Sometimes, it can seem easier to ignore or pretend that a conflict or problem doesn't exist. I know that I am one who prefers to avoid conflict if possible, as it can be uncomfortable to deal with it. However, in this story – the solution to the problem of the alligator seems so simple. If the members of the community would open up and talk about their problem, then they could prevent others from being hurt in the future. It may not always be easy to do, but how we care for our siblings in Christ, and talk about the hard things in life, shows our faith and maturity as God's people.

Matthew 18 lays out a plan for us to confront the “alligators” in our communities, and it begins first with conversation. When conflict arises, it is important for the people involved to come together so that they can discuss the sins that have broken their relationship in the community. Note that Jesus doesn't say that we are first to go to Facebook or Twitter and call out the person who offended you. Instead, we engage one another in conversation, not to seek revenge for the wrongs that have been made, but to pursue reconciliation. If the people or groups involved are unable to repent of the errors that have been made, then it is time to bring a witness into the situation. The purpose of the witness is not to take sides or persuade each party to see the error of their ways, but rather ensure and testify that Christ is present in the midst of the conflict.

The second crucial piece to resolving conflict in the Body of Christ, is prayer. We know and believe in the power of prayer, as it says in verse 19, if two agree on something and ask for it, it will be done. This verse must be taken in context, because even if you and I agree we should win the lottery, that doesn't guarantee that God will grant our request. However, when any two people or

groups agree to reconcile with each other, then we can trust in God's promises that this request will be honored.

Finally, God who is faithful and just, offers this gift of forgiveness and grace to us and empowers us to offer the same to others. When our words and actions are centered in God and on Christ who is crucified and risen for the life of the world – not what serves us and our own desires – we can trust that God will be present to bring about the healing and wholeness that we seek and that so desperately need. Conflict and disagreements are going to happen – it is part of life and the brokenness that we still experience on this side of glory. However, when we focus on the things that serve the whole community rather than just ourselves, and foster peace, justice and reconciliation for others, this is the work of the Holy Spirit in each of us. In times of sin which lead to conflict, it is the work of the Spirit that can calm fiery emotions, bring clarity to judgment, and supply the peace of God. The Holy Spirit shows us the error of our ways and brings us to repentance. The purpose of confronting the conflict is always with the hope of reconciliation. Even after it seems like all hope of reconciling with a person is gone and they have been cut off from the community, the person is never truly cut off because we never stop praying for their return to the Body of Christ.

That is the good news that Jesus speaks to us in today's gospel text – these words are more than just a set of rules for us to follow when someone has sinned. Jesus' teaching reminds us that we are called to be in community with one another, and when there is error, rather than ignore it, or run from it, we are called to do the difficult work of talking to the person about it as a means of seeking reconciliation and forgiveness. Because God has shown us unconditional love and forgiveness through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, we can strive to show this same love and forgiveness to others. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[Prayers from ELCA Worship from Home, <https://blogs.elca.org/worship/>]

Drawn together by the compassion of God, we pray for the church, the world, and all those in need, responding to each petition with the words “Hear us and help us.”

Unite your church, O God. Give to all the baptized the gifts of repentance and reconciliation. Strengthen ecumenical partnerships and interracial cooperation among the churches. Guide the work of the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches.

O God, Leader of the church, in your mercy,
hear us and help us.

Protect your creation, O God. Teach us ways to live that do not harm what you have entrusted to our care. Give to the animals the habitat they need for life. Renew and enliven places suffering from drought, flood, storms, or pollution.

O God, Creator of the earth, in your mercy,
hear us and help us.

Bless the nations, O God. Frustrate the designs of dictators. Give to the military a clear and moral purpose. Guide legislators, civil servants, judges, and police toward the well-being of all. Infuse the coming election season with honesty and integrity.

O God, Governor of the world, in your mercy,
hear us and help us.

Sustain us in our work, O God, and give employment to those who need it. Shape societies to ensure fair treatment for all who labor. Help us to love our neighbors in and through our work.

O God, Guardian of all peoples, in your mercy,
hear us and help us.

Guide our civil discourse, O God. Alert us to social evils and show our nation how to end the patterns of racial injustice. Accompany all are endeavoring to bring about a renewed society. Curb the violence in our cities.

O God, Haven of righteousness, in your mercy,
hear us and help us.

Tend to all in need, O God. Assist all friends and family members who are seeking restored relationships. Give community to the lonely and welcome to the outcast.

Shelter all who are vulnerable in body, mind, or spirit, especially those we name here before you.

O God, Physician of the sick, in your mercy,
hear us and help us.

Receive once again, O God, our plea for the end of the coronavirus. Comfort those afflicted with COVID-19 and uphold our medical workers. Give youth a sense of responsibility for others and provide the world a vaccine.

O God, Healer in times of plague, in your mercy,
hear us and help us.

Hear each one of us, O God, as we pray now for ourselves.

O God, Lover of us all, in your mercy,
hear us and help us.

We remember with thanksgiving those who have died in faith. As you equipped them, equip us with your protection and power, until with them we see your salvation.

O God, Eternal One, in your mercy,
hear us and help us.

All these things and whatever else you see that we need, we entrust to your mercy; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

Almighty God, Father, ✝ Son, and Holy Spirit, bless us now and forever.

Amen.