

Mat 18:15-20

Problems in Paradise...and the early church was no different.

Wholeness and Community are in play here and that includes the tension and anxiety that arises from the sins we commit against one another and what impact that might have... not just to individual relationships, but on the community and world as a whole!

At stake is the issue of sin, confrontation, repentance, and forgiveness as we all strive to live in right relationship with God and with one another on this small sphere hurling through space together.

This passage comes in the middle of a larger one related to being a community centered on Jesus' teachings. Leaders that are considered great are supposed to be humble...serving the lowly and the marginalized...those other folks.

Followers of Jesus were not to be "stumbling blocks" and were to hold themselves accountable... causing not even one to be lost...to include forgiving sinners 70 x 7 times if necessary. This is the context of today's passage.

Holding oneself accountable and responsible for one's behavior and actions with regard to the health and wellbeing of the community as a whole...Now when I look around today and don't see many of our leaders or ourselves for that matter acting in a manner that Jesus expects from the children of God...Accountable and Responsible...we'd rather not look in the mirror...we would rather finger point and blame others for all that's wrong wouldn't we?!

Instead, we seem to be more self-absorbed...many times at the expense of others...see this is a kingdom of man mentality...if it's good then we had something to do with it...if it's bad then let's find someone else to blame.

I learned this lesson young when I was a store manager way back in the day. I just got back from vacation to find my district manager waiting for me in my office...it was the only time I was ever written up. When I asked why, when I

was away...he stated that my store was broken out of and many items were stolen.

When I said I wasn't even here... he replied that I was responsible and that if I didn't properly train those under me to follow proper closing procedures then I shouldn't go vacation. My knee jerk reaction was to get angry...

But in hindsight I learned a valuable lesson that day...that I was responsible and accountable for my life and for others placed in my charge... wow look around... how many of us, or our nation's leaders hold themselves accountable and responsible for anything?

Now I worked for the Dept of Defense for 35 years...whenever anything went wrong we would spend lots of time trying to find someone or something to blame. I often would stand up and claim full responsibility for everything wrong, even though most times I had no idea what they were talking about...you see it immediately diffuses the situation and focuses us together on the real work of problem solving and remediating the situation going forward.

So what happens when someone harms or hurts you in some way? We are to take responsibility for our own re-action... and then bring this to our transgressor's attention, in love, with the purpose of resolving the issue for the sake of the relationship...one on one for in Christ every single person has value and matters!

Today what a lot of us call our Christian nation is nothing more than a voluntary association of like-minded individuals regulating itself based on the will of the elite, the powerful, and the majority!

Instead, Jesus calls us to be a fellowship united with one another under the ways and authority of Jesus. And Jesus doesn't create a specific model of leadership or organization. Church conflict, or any conflict for that matter, is nothing new...the problem arises when our Christian community causes harm to the "Body of Christ" as a whole!

For ultimately is it God's will be done...or our will be done? Are we created in God's image, or do we really just create God in our image to match our ways of thinking for the good of our tribes at the expense of everybody else?

Jesus advocates love and reconciliation, first one on one, and then communally...Why? Because two people with differences coming together with empathy and compassion for one another will always deepen their relationship even in conflict! And in instances where their differences are not reconcilable then a community of love steps in to help mediate.

I only wish this were true today! Instead, when we feel wronged... we use others and social media to bully and scream into the internet at all those that have wronged us...last I looked... public shaming never ever changed a thing and will only ever serve to make things worse.

I have also NEVER seen reconciliation happen with an I'm right and your wrong mentality. We need to get back to basics where "one on one" we enter into a relationship with openness and love...agape...and all are better for it.

We are too much a society of black and white...right and wrong...us vs them...liberals vs conservatives and social media exacerbates this dichotomy...that isn't the calling of ANY organization or nation which professes to follow the ways of Jesus!

Albert Einstein said "We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them." See Jesus is telling us to rise beyond our dualistic ways of thinking and see things from God's perspective...how our creator meant for us to be... in relationship with one another...Jesus called this state of being the Kingdom of God... or Heaven.

Let's look at what prevents us from true community in God's world...

I am blessed to have friends of many faiths, races, and lifestyles living all over the planet...and I see and hear similar issues ALL over! Power and money are indeed the foundations for much of what ails the world today...

And it has always been this way...Jesus called this the Kingdom of man...created of, by, and for those in power... to ensure that they and their tribes stay in power...at any cost.

See in God's eyes there really is no democrat or republican, Christian or non-Christian, black or white...maybe this sounds familiar...Paul once declared that there is no Jew or Greek, Male or Female, Slave or Free.

See Paul eventually transcended his dualistic point of view...this is sometimes referred to as Third Way Thinking...and Jesus was a Master of It...perhaps it's no accident that we express God as a trinity.

We cannot solve our problems from inside the system that created it or else we will continually point at opposing point of view.

It's funny, I have been all around the world and I have yet to meet a good or evil person...people are much more complex than that...And EVERYONE thinks their way of thinking is the right way...See... NO ONE ever thinks there the bad guys in the story!

And both sides of any argument will always contain radical elements within it. In Jesus' time these folks were called Zealots...in fact one of Jesus' own disciples was Simon "the Zealot"...do you think the Gospel writers were unconscious of this way of thinking?!

Now a zealot uses force to impose their way of thinking upon those that oppose them... and zealots will resort to violence when necessary.

So let's take an example to illustrate this...take the politically charged term "Black Lives Matter" (of course this is now a cause with zealots on both sides of the racial divide). But the term black lives matters is important. When reduced to a dualistic approach this causes anxiety in lots of folks.

Black people can turn this into a "victim" cause (along with their zealots) and White people, experiencing shaming will push back... also claiming "victim" status with their side's zealots pushing back with violence as well.

Notice that when you are a victim, you have ceased to take responsibility and accountability for your own life and choices...the blame lies squarely with the other side! Black and White, Right and Wrong, Us vs Them...duality!

Remember no one ever thinks they are the bad guys! When you take on the role of victim in a dualistic system it will always result in an “us vs them” construct and your side (no matter which side you’re on) is always the right side...see there is no way forward together...we all lose!

Last I knew, no one in this world chose how much skin pigment or melanin they were born with. But the current system of power, hundreds of years ago, used skin color...among many other things...to differentiate and dehumanize people...why?!...in order for them to systematically take advantage of them in many cruel ways for the sake of power and wealth...welcome to the kingdom of man!

In this country our laws up until 1960 defined a “red” man as being  $\frac{1}{4}$  human and a “black” man as  $\frac{1}{2}$  human. Think about that...people with different skin colors were not defined by our laws as being fully human!

See then we could “in good conscious” harm another human being if we convinced ourselves those people are not truly human...a child of God...we dehumanize and vilify the other group to justify our actions against them as being righteous... therefore we get to label the other side: bad guys...savages... animals... giving us the right to harm them...and to Jesus this was an atrocity...Who are we to define who was a child of God... and then to separate them out...This is a crime against all of creation!

And the policies and systems that created these labels and distinctions need to be superseded...but that does not discount awareness that ANYONE being harmed by the current system of power DO MATTER!

In fact LGBTQ lives matter right now and Muslim lives matter right now...in other words who is the “other” for you... right now... causing separation

between ALL God's children...could be any group...so what people groups have you dehumanized!?

Jesus went out of His way to teach His disciples that the hated Samaritan's lives mattered and that the untouchable lepers lives mattered and that the worthless women and children and slaves lives mattered...heck even Roman soldier's lives mattered to God!

See Whoever was the "OTHER" for them, needed to be singled out in order to change the opposing point of view which perpetuates prejudice and separation. Now this never means that your life isn't hard...it just means that your life isn't made harder by something you truly had no control over... like skin color.

Jesus tells a story of a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to search for just one lost one. It's not that the other 99 weren't just as important, it was that Jesus placed His attention on the sheep that was in danger. Parents instinctively know this with their children as well... Like the prodigal son, we say the squeaky wheel gets the grease.

In other words -You put your attention on the thing that needs it most...that's what matters to you right now!

And this is not to say we are all the same...there are many different viewpoints and cultures... thank God. Vanilla would get real OLD if that was the only flavor there was...and it doesn't mean that we like all the flavors but that doesn't make one flavor better than another.

So ask yourself who is the "other" for you right now? What people groups are you pre-judging? Who on the margins needs to matter to you right now!?

In order to evolve we must see things from a larger point of view...God's point of view! We don't live in a black and white world my friends...we are all many shades of grey...and at times...intentionally or unintentionally we may harm one another...we sin...we miss the mark.

So take responsibility and accountability for your own actions...then connect one on one... especially when you feel wronged.

See all our lives matter to God my friends... but we followers of Christ must never lose sight of those left behind or made invisible by the kingdom of man.

And until third way thinking, accountability and responsibility for all God's creation makes its way into our hearts to include our leadership and governmental systems all around the world... I am afraid we still have lots and lots of work here to do...Bishop George Councell said it best when he told those he confirmed..."You are a Child of God...now go and act like one!"

Your faithful servant,

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