

Two Sundays ago, at the 8 o'clock service, we had a visitor in church. An uninvited visitor. A visitor with wings and brown fur. Having apparently been stirred up by the sermon he caused quite a commotion immediately afterwards during the offertory and prayers of the church. After I curbed his enthusiasm by cornering and containing him for the remainder of the service, I was then able to administer proper pastoral care to him afterwards when most everyone else had left the building. This incident reminded me of another story:

Three Pastors were having lunch at a restaurant. One said "You know, since the middle of summer I've been having trouble with bats in the loft and the attic at church. I've tried everything--noise, spray, cats--nothing seems to scare them away." Another said "Yeah, me too. I've got dozens living in my belfry and in the narthex attic. I've even had the place fumigated, and they still won't go away." The third said, "I used to have all kinds of problems with bats too, until one day I figured out the solution: I baptized all of them and made them confirmed members of the church... I haven't seen a single one of them back since!"

On a *much* more serious note, nineteen years ago this week people had *extra* reasons to come to church, especially if they hadn't been to a church in a while. In the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, people were looking for a place to give them hope, a place to help them make sense of the world, a place where they could come and be with others who cared about them. In short, people were seeking a caring community.

Today's Gospel from Matthew 18 talks about *our* community. It's a community that is bound together by the forgiveness of sins. Martin Luther sums up today's text very nicely. Maybe you remember these words from the Small Catechism: "In this Christian church, He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers." The question I would like us all to consider today is this: Do we, here at First Lutheran in Glencoe, see ourselves as a caring community of forgiven sinners? In other words, do we help to make this church a place where people feel welcomed, that lets people know we care about them, that this is a place, most of all, where people can know that they and all of us are forgiven sinners welcomed by the Savior, Jesus?

As we think about the answer to this, I'd like us to back up to just a few verses before our assigned Gospel text begins in Matthew 18. We'll start at verse 12 and verse 13 of this same chapter. Here Jesus uses an example from everyday life as an illustration to show what a caring community looks like. He says: "If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he

not leave the 99 on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the 99 that never went astray.”

It’s tempting for us to see this shepherd as the Good Shepherd Himself, Jesus. But actually, that’s not who our Lord is describing in these verses. It’s just a shepherd, a regular person who is showing great compassion and care for that which is lost.

In verse 14 Jesus shows us that in the same kind of way, this is how God really cares for the lost through His church. He says, “So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” Do you begin to see the underlying theme here? Jesus’ purpose through this image, as well as the ones that will follow, is to demonstrate just how much God cares for the lost and He does this through the church.

Jesus continues: “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.”

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks as the government began to fight the war on terror, many people sought out the solace of community in the church. God established government **and** church to deal with wrong in two different ways. It is the government’s job to keep people safe by punishing wrongdoers. We heard that in last Sunday’s Epistle lesson from Romans chapter 13. But how should the **church** act when someone does wrong? Jesus teaches that in Matthew 18. He says we should go out of our way to seek after someone who is wandering from our fellowship (v. 15). That should happen at the most personal level. In other words, one-on-one. Don’t spread the news around that so-and-so did such-and-such. Not **every** issue is **everyone’s** issue. We should be a community where we trust that each of us in our private lives will seek after anyone wandering (vv. 18–19). We should not be a community of “enquiring minds” who want to know the details of what someone has **allegedly** done, but instead we should be a community that is considerate of the reputation of our fellow Christian who has gone astray. It’s only when those private efforts fail that the church should learn about a brother or sister’s sin, and even then we remain a community considerate of the person wandering away.

In verse 19 Jesus goes on to say, “If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.” It’s clear

that Jesus is saying our talk about a person who has gone astray should be done in fervent prayer. Take it to your heavenly Father. Why? Because we know that Jesus our Savior and helper is present among us: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them (v. 20)”. All this is His way with us and through us. Through this *caring* process, the Spirit of Jesus strives through community to “forgive all my sins and the sins of all believers.” Finally, it is interesting to note, the earthly process laid out by Jesus ends with apparent failure Verse 17: “If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” More on that in a moment.

For now, let’s move on to our text for today starting with verse 21: Peter came up and said to (Jesus), “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” After 9/11, many sought out churches for a time but eventually decided to leave. Like many Americans, Peter sees the church as a voluntary association of individuals. Jesus seizes Peter’s question as an opportunity to show that the Holy Spirit works differently among us than our surrounding cultural models might dictate. In other words, the world says forgive someone once, maybe even twice, but there are definitely limits on forgiveness. Jesus goes against the grain, and in fact, turns this thinking upside down with His radical statement: “Not.. 7 times, but 70 times 7 times.” To put it another way, free and abundant forgiveness, just like your Father in heaven has towards you. The Holy Spirit is the one who calls us to belong to this caring community of believers in Christ, in the first place, it’s not our voluntary decision. And because of God the Father’s loving and forgiving work for you and me in Christ, we are also loving and forging toward others, even though they doesn't make sense to the rest of the world and even to our own way of thinking which is sinful by nature.

Verse 12 started the lesson with a secular shepherd. Now in verse 23, a parable about “the kingdom of heaven,” begins with “a king who wished to settle accounts.” This parable is not just about the king but about how God’s kingdom works, the heavenly King and His people together. When the forgiven debtor did not forgive another, (v.31) “His fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.” Here Jesus picks up what He left hanging in verse 17. When the church’s efforts seem to have failed, the earthly church is not relieved of continuing to care for the wayward brother or sister in the faith. Like Jesus, we continue to show concern for “a Gentile and a tax collector.” About our apparent failures on this side of eternity, we will leave it to the king who will settle accounts.

We leave the judgment up to our God, our King. It's our job to seek out those who have gone astray and bring to them the news of God's forgiveness of sins in Christ. If that person who strayed into sin rejects the Lord's free and abundant forgiveness that is between them and God. He or she will have to answer to Him. We in the church, though, have done our part, namely, of sharing the Good News about Jesus and the caring community He has made His church to be.

It's clear God made government and church to respond to wrong in different ways. The government punishes wrongdoers to keep others safe. And oh, how our elected officials and law enforcement officers need our prayers these days! We pray that God will help them to do their jobs safely, wisely, and in a fair manner. The church's job is to share God's Word. The church shares God's Word. First, the Law that shows us our sin, and second, the Gospel that shows us what Christ has done to earn our forgiveness and then delivers that forgiveness to us personally through His powerful Word, His holy Supper, and Holy Baptism

And when a Christian wanders from the ways of God: We seek them out, because "In *this* Christian church, he daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers." "In *this* Christian church . . ." Are we this kind of church? By God's grace, yes, we are! We will we continue to reach out to those around us to invite them to come to receive free and abundant forgiveness from God, so they can see what a difference it makes in their lives. With His help, we will also give free and abundant forgiveness to any who may have wronged us and then we'll see what a difference that makes in our lives. With help from Him, we will show that Christ-like love and concern to everyone! With our Lord Jesus' guidance and strength we will continue to be a caring community of forgiven sinners until He welcomes us all into the eternal life of His kingdom of heaven He has prepared for us! Amen.