**Gospe**l: Matthew 18:15-20

“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. 16But 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. 17If 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. 18Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19Again, 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. 20For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

**Message**: The Feeling’s Mutual

A lot of people have walked away from “Organized Religion” as a result of repercussions of this week’s gospel. “If a **member** . . .sins against you.” The specifics of this phrase can range from minor/petty to very major. Into the mix is one’s definition of “sin.” Basically, any thought, word or deed that is contrary to one’s perception and relationship with God as stated in the 10 Commandments, #1 of 4 being—loving God with all one’s heart, mind and soul, having no other gods before Him. The other 6 Commandments relate to loving our neighbor as our self. Then consider how “love” is defined and lived and how you love yourself. Depending on what the situation is and how one approaches the situation, the response could be either “Who are you to be pointing out what you may consider my fault/sin?” or “I am so sorry; I did not realize . . .” or “someone has been loving/coveting one’s neighbor beyond the boundary of propriety.”

What flashed through my mind as I was thinking about the lectionary was a movie from 2004 entitled “Crash.” I called it up with my magic fire stick and spent 2 hours watching it. There wasn’t one flat character in the entire movie. Every scene depicted ethnic hatred, racial tension (even within races and ethnicity), marital strife, work place manipulation, sibling rivalry, parent/child relationships, all interwoven around jealousy, favoritism, fear, distrust, anger, domination, hatred and a smidgen of love. One person’s indiscretion or one person’s self-righteous/sanctimonious behavior ***impacts*** (think of a meteor’s power upon impact with earth) not just one other, but **others** (plural**)**, no matter how distant or removed they may seem, all with potentially devastating consequences. The movie also shows how one’s “sin against another” (gross humiliation of another to subtle slurs) opens opportunity for salvation and forgiveness, of righting the wrong. One who has caused harm to another is now faced with a situation in which he/she must rescue the one who has been offended.

As the Holy Trinity exists in mutual interdependence, we, too, are interdependent. We are not free **from** each other. We are free **in** each other. In any group or community, there is a collective wisdom and discernment. There is a need for what the other has to offer for the individual or collective good. In ancient OT days, a community or village may have been only the size of a city block (not even a big city block). Houses were built with shared walls. There may or may not have been a city wall. Within that compressed living space, when one suffered (whether a physical illness or in conflict with a neighbor) all suffered. Survival/quality of life depended on cooperation, trust and commitment of each person with another and the community as a whole. Working, living, sacrificing with genuine love and concern for the other was important for the well-being of the community. Living in such close proximity of others, conflict and disagreement, however, are given entities. How conflict and disagreement are settled reflects the character of what Jesus intended to be Church—the reason why God physically came among us.

Jesus is the incarnation of God—in whom the Spirit of God was pleased to dwell. Jesus lived exemplifying God’s character and God’s will for how humanity should live in community, the Kingdom of God. Jesus told Peter, “upon this rock, I will build MY Church.” Peter’s faith that Jesus is **the** promised Messiah is the faith we place in Jesus, trusting him to lead the Church, how we live as God’s people. It is precisely through conflict/disagreement that Christians demonstrate to the world how to bind and loose, what should be bound and what should be loosed, to appropriately speak truth in love. As Jesus is the incarnation of God (God in flesh), we, the Church, are the incarnation of Jesus, the body of Christ. Through Christ we work through conflict using the language of confession, restoration, and reconciliation.

How does this process of confession, restoration, reconciliation operate? We in the Western culture are ingrained with that sense of independence and autonomy. *I don’t need you or church*. Breaking away or walking away from an uncomfortable/difficult situation is characteristic. While in the Eastern culture, preservation of another’s dignity/honor is more highly valued. Matthew, written from the perspective of the Eastern culture, says that after meeting with the “offender” on multiple occasions with no acceptable outcome, that person should be treated as a Gentile or tax collector—in other words, become an outsider. Aren’t those the very people Jesus hung out with—outsiders? Isn’t it the lost sheep the shepherd goes after? Don’t we forgive 70 X 7? Based on one’s relationship with God, all that we do should be done with a sense of accountability; sooner or later we will stand before God. Our actions must reflect personal integrity and genuineness, and at the same time, respecting and preserving the dignity of the other.

Our mission as Christians is to live for the transformation of the world. It is an immense task. We are **not** to sit around waiting for Jesus’ return to fix it all or finish what he started. What Jesus started is the Church. Our actions and outreach are not subtle or secret. Jesus said, “**You** be the Light! Let **YOUR** light shine, for the glory of God.” Live so all see God in you. Love is not just an emotion. God’s love could be offering an alternative action or rationale to an existing point of tension. The centrality of God’s love is genuine caring for the welfare of another’s **state of soul**. What is the state of your soul? Do you want that for another? Perhaps the state of both souls needs transformation. Love of God shown to all is the essence of discipleship and transformation. One may think they do not need Church, that it is a voluntary association of autonomous individuals, but Church, Jesus’ Church, based on mutual interdependence, needs YOU. You matter; you are valued. The Lord be with you.

**Prayers of the People**: Gracious God, you are giver of all good and perfect gifts, that by your grace we may serve. Hear our prayers and grant to those for whom we hold in your care all things needed for healing and reconciliation.

**Service of Word & Table**:

**Benediction**: To God be the glory. To Jesus, who is able to keep us from falling, and present us faultless before the presence of his glory, be majesty, dominion and power now and forever. Go in God’s grace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

**Old Testament Reading**: Ezekiel 33:7-11

So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. 8If I say to the wicked, “O wicked ones, you shall surely die,” and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. 9But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

10Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: “Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?” 11Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

**New Testament Reading**: Romans 13:8-14

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” 10Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

11Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; 12the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; 13let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.