

## Relational Power: Matthew 18:15-20

Norwalk Christian Church, September 7, 2014, Year A, Proper 18

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*Lord, by the power of your Holy Spirit open our understanding that we may receive the Word of life. Amen.*

Here's what happened in the life of your church last week:

Last Sunday afternoon, Chi Rho (our middle school youth group) and CYF (our high schoolers), gathered at Kate Raun's pool for a swim party.

On Tuesday at 10am, people poured into the church as they always do for Tuesday coffee time. There were cookies, honeydew melon and coffee cake. There were lots of coffee, and even more stories to share. If you are free on Tuesdays at 10am and not joining us for coffee time...well, you are missing out on communion!

Tuesday afternoon, a young couple, not officially affiliated with our church, met for premarital counseling. They told me that they chose our church, because we were the only church in town that would welcome them, as non-members, into our church. What a testimony to who we are! Later that night, Boy Scouts met in our building as they have for years.

Wednesday morning, our own Betty Smith had a successful, long-awaited, surgery, and the phone lines were a buzz with her church family calling to see how she was. That night, over 25 Chi Rho & CYF youth and sponsors--filled with joy and energy--gathered in our building for our weekly youth group meeting and Mary Johnson cooked a delicious dinner for them all. At the same time, our Chancel Choir and Chalice Handbells gathered to share in music and fellowship, preparing to lead you in worship.

On Thursday morning, a group of seniors gathered in fellowship hall for senior exercise, as they do every Monday and Thursday. On Thursday afternoon, the Jenny McAfee Circle, a group of dedicated women who have been meeting together for years, led our community in a discussion on the quality of water in Iowa, and what we can do to ensure we have clean water and a clean environment for many years to come.

Thursday night, Connie Garrison and others hosted a community event called "Discover Your Optimal Health" day. People from around Norwalk came to learn about how they can better care for the gift God had given them, as they live a happy, healthy life.

On Friday, and every day this week, people arrived here to deliver meals to homes around our community. For decades, this church has run the Meals on Wheels program, and it's one of the most visible ways we serve our community.

On Saturday, members of our 30&1 class met to play games and, of course, eat some delicious treats.

Then today, here we are, gathered together for worship and fellowship, as we celebrate all the ministries of this church. We are an active church full of life!

Earlier, we read, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” If these words are to be believed, then we keep Jesus busy at Norwalk Christian Church! We should be proud of our church. Amen?!

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Of course, these often quoted words of Jesus are not all this passage says. To get to them, we have to wade through all this stuff about church conflict. “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.”

We aren’t a church in conflict. We are a church that’s alive and active! So why, on a Sunday like this, when we celebrate who we are as a church and find ways we can better plug into the life of God in this place, why would we read a text like this?

Well, that is a good question. And the short answer is, “We often preach from the lectionary, a collection of scriptures used by churches of all denominations to guide us each week, and this was the text chosen for this Sunday.” In other words, “I didn’t pick this text! It was chosen for me! So lay off!”

The last couple of months, we have spent some time in the Gospel of Matthew, so we shouldn’t be surprised to hear confusing, difficult teaching from the mouth of Jesus. Matthew likes to sharpen words of Jesus that other writers leave rounded.

Unfortunately for Matthew, Christians over the centuries have made these words much sharper than he ever intended. They contain one of the few instances of a teaching of Jesus that is so very practical. Often, Jesus speaks in parables, abstractly, offering general principles for life and discipleship. But here, here we are giving a three-point plan for how to take care of sin in the church. And church folk loooove 3-point plans. Give us a 3 point plan and a balanced budget, and we think we can save the world!

The problem is, too often, church folk have used this 3-point plan as a 3-point prod, poking and pushing out of the church anyone who didn’t fit in or act perfectly, all while feeling holier than thou.

Shame on them! That is not what this passage is about, and if you’ve ever been the victim of such abuse by the church, let me, a minister of the church, say sincerely, I am so sorry. These words *do not* give church leaders the permission to pry into the private lives of church members and kick people out of the church.

That’s the complete opposite of what Jesus intends! Jesus doesn’t say, “If a member of the church is sinning, according to your definition of sin, go tell them they’re wrong!” It says, “if a member of the church sins against YOU...wronged you. Maybe they’ve gossiped about you or spoke in a way that caused you pain. Maybe the two of you got

into it at the board meeting, or they judged you because of who you love, or how you dress, or how you vote.

Our world loves to polarize around things like this, assuming that if you disagree, then you cannot be in community. And how sad that the church has bought into this lie, often using this text to enforce this un-Christ-like behavior.

Here's what Jesus is saying: If there's a problem in your life together, if fellowship has been broken, then you must do whatever it takes to restore the relationship. Our life together matters, and every member of our community is valued, needed, and loved.

If someone in the church has acted in a way that is not the way of love...don't cut them off and kick them out. Don't act in the same hateful way back to them. Love them, and exhaust all possibilities in trying to restore what has been broken!

Okay, that's well and good. But what if they don't listen to your pain? What if the behavior doesn't change? What do you do then?

Well, "Treat them like the Gentiles and Tax Collectors," Jesus says. Now, how in the world church folk came to believe that this meant we should kick people out of the church, I will never understand. Have we not been paying attention to the life of Jesus?

All throughout Matthew, Jesus is dining with Tax Collectors. He's healing the sick among Jewish *and* Gentile communities. Matthew, the supposed author of this Gospel, was, himself, a tax collector! Treat them like the Gentiles and Tax Collectors--well, that means love them even more! Invite them over for dinner. Go out of your way to love them, crossing whatever barriers between them and the community exist, so that divisions may cease and community may be restored.

Maybe some of us here have dividing walls among us. If so, listen to Jesus' words. We need one another. We need this community. And no wall. No wrong. NOTHING is important enough to get in the way of our life together. What do we need to do to ensure that everyone feels welcomed and loved in this community? For, when relationships are restored, and two or three who were a part come together, Jesus is present!

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Now, all that, that's the stuff I really didn't want to talk about today. It's all prelude for the meat of the text, the last three verses. Hear them again:

"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...if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you.... For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Now that's power! A few weeks ago, we heard Jesus give Peter this "binding and loosing power," and now, Jesus gives it to all the disciples, and to the church. But what does it mean?

I think it means that we, as a church, we have power. I called this sermon "Relational Power", because that's the kind of power we have. We have power together. When we gather together, Christ is with us, and in our hands is the power of Christ to save the world!

We are the hands and feet of God in this world. Our ministries are God's ministries. Our mission, God's mission. That's why we better be very careful how we use this power.

If *we* build a wall, then people will think God built a wall. When we bind people to hate, prejudice and abuse, people will believe that God is the one who hates, judges, and abuses them. But when we tear down walls, when we loose people from the burden of judgment, they will know God's unconditional love, alive and active in our community.

That's why Jesus calls us to do all we can, exhausting all possibilities, to restore broken relationships. It's that important.

That's why we use our gifts in service to the church and the world. Because we are the power of God in this world. We are Christ's body.

Our hands, Christ's hands. Our feet, Christ's feet. Our words, Christ's words. Christ is with us--and alive through us--changing the world.

Everyone of us matters. We need each other! And every gift we bring is vital. The more hands we have in service, the greater our relational power in our world, the more our community will experience the unconditional love of Christ.

Think of all we can accomplish! Think of all the lives that could be loosed in service to God. The broken hearts we could bind up in the love of God. The burdens we could untie and loose from people's shoulders, throwing off the judgments churches and our world have put on them because they didn't look right or act right. Think of all the broken pieces of our community we could bind up in the peace and mercy of God.

We are a church with the power to give God's life and joy!  
How are you using that power?

Christ is here among us. How will your hands be Christ's hands?

Christ is calling us together in ministry. How will you accept the call?

May we experience the true, relational power, as together we answer the call of Christ, saying, "Here I am, Lord. Use me!"