

70 x 7: A Theology of Reconciliation

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Matthew 18:15-17 is well known in some Christian settings as a text that summarizes a process for handling conflict within the church or between church members.ⁱ These verses, however, are too often interpreted in isolation. When understood in the context of the entire chapter, we see an unfolding reflection upon power, offense and forgiveness. This narrative exhorts individuals to be reconcilers and the church as a whole to be a reconciling community as an alternative to the spiral of retribution found in the dominant society.

We will briefly examine Matthew 18 according to the following outline.

- I. vv 1-5 Jesus' challenge to hierarchical systems of Power
- II. vv 6-10 Exhortation and Consequences to Potential Offenders
- III. vv 12-14 Central parable regarding the least/lost as the foundation of the Community
- IV. vv 15-22 Exhortation and Consequences to Potential Victims
 - A. vv 15-17: Process of Confrontation, Accountability, Restoration
 - B. vv 18-22: Community Conferencing and Unlimited Forgiveness
- V. vv 23-35: Consequences of Limited Forgiveness: Retribution and Hierarchy Prevail

I. Matthew 18 begins with a question of power. We need not be shocked at the disciples' query concerning "greatness" (v. 1). In fact, their aspirations for power reflect concerns common to all of us. The hierarchical institutions and social structures we live in generate anxieties in everyone concerning status, prestige and professional advancement. Jesus presents a child and answers, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest" (v. 4). Jesus is not referring to an attitude of innocence here, but to social standing. In first Century Palestine, children were at the bottom of the social scale, had no rights and were the property of their parents. Whereas the disciples aspire upwards, Jesus invites them to solidarity downwards.

II. In verses 6-10 Jesus further dramatizes the issues of power and vulnerability with a series of exhortations warning the disciples not to "scandalize" (take advantage of) those with less power. While the disciples are concerned about being the "biggest", Jesus is concerned with not taking advantage of the "little one" (literally the "tiniest"). Whether our exercise of power is redemptive or abusive will be determined by our treatment of and relationship to the weak and marginalized.

Our church communities are organic bodies where we are all dependent on each other. When persons abuse their power someone is violated, damaged or left out.

Jesus begins his exhortation warning potential offenders to be vigilant against dominating action (v. 6). Jesus is not naïve: he acknowledges that injustice and violation will occur in this world as a result of the abuse of power (v. 7). But the church is called to embody an alternative model in which such abuse is abnormal and unacceptable.

This is followed by a warning to Christians not to use hurtful behavior (hand, foot and eye were considered the symbols of agency in antiquity). Verses 8-9 state emphatically that it is far better to deprive ourselves of something than to get it at someone else's expense. Jesus exhorts us to not be "thoughtless" towards marginalized people, as if they were dispensable and without value (v. 10).

III. The central parable of the lost sheep (vv. 12-14) can be read as referring back to the offender (vv. 6-9) or forward to the victim (vv. 15-35). Both those who abuse power and those who are marginalized by the abuse of power can be the "lost" ones in our church communities. In either case we are to seek out and restore to community the excluded or the alienated. Jesus' parable of the lost sheep suggests an alternative view of how power is distributed in the community. The health and the wholeness of the community is not determined by the influential few or even by the majority, but by the welfare of the weakest members.

IV. In verses 15-17, Jesus describes a demanding process for bringing offenders back into community. The moral authority, and thus the initiative, resides with the violated party. There is first an attempt to help the offender save face through a private approach by the victim (v. 15). But it is the victim who determines whether s/he has been heard and whether justice has been done. If the victim does not feel heard by the offender, the victim invites the support of one or two "witnesses", as was common rabbinic practice. "Every word" of both victim and offender's testimony is confirmed. The supporters may also help determine consequence and impact.

If this process does not lead to healing and justice, the next step is to consult the broader community. It is significant that here there is no intermediary institution such as a prosecutor, judge or jury. The church community seeks to be an advocate for both offender and victim in its demand for accountability, repentance, justice and forgiveness. If the offender continues to refuse to cooperate, the church treats the offender as an outsider – that is, someone who needs to hear the good news and be redeemed (v. 17)! This is not a strategy of punishment but rather a change in the community's approach to the offender.

Verses 18-20 seem to indicate that the church community, inclusive of the victim and offender, represent an alternative to the adjudication of justice by civil authority. This is akin to the process of Community Justice Conferencing where restitution and reconciliation are agreed upon consensually. Matthean scholar, J. Andrew Overman writes, "Binding and loosing refer to the political and juridical power to punish or excuse, to imprison or set free....they constitute both a challenge and a substitute for those processes already established in the civil realm outside of the community." ⁱⁱ If the church can bring together the victim, offender and

supportive others who arrive together at a decision that is reasonable and restorative, then the church is cooperating with the grace of God (2 Cor. 5:18-6:1). Whenever the church takes this community process of transforming conflict seriously, Jesus is profoundly present (v. 20).

But all of us have deep preconceptions about the ultimately retributive nature of “justice”. This is reflected in the disciples’ question about limits to forgiveness (vv. 21-22). We understand that we need to forgive sometimes, but surely there are some things that cannot be forgiven! Jesus’ answer that we must forgive “seventy times seven” seeks to reverse Lamech’s curse in Gen 4:24. Christians must no longer cooperate with the spiral of violence and retribution begun by Cain’s fratricide and intensified by Lamech. If we refuse to forgive and thus “bind” God’s grace, we are consigning ourselves to the logic of the retributive system. The cruelty of this system is described in the closing parable in verses 23-35.

V. The story compares forgiveness with the releasing of people from economic debt. As William Herzog has shown, this parable describes the dysfunctional system of patron- client relationships that characterized the ancient royal court.ⁱⁱⁱ A high-ranking servant owes his king the exorbitant sum of ten thousand talents (one talent was worth more than 15 years wages, v. 24). The king orders the slave and his family to be sold (v. 25). When the servant begs him, the King grants him amnesty thus making an exception to his own rules (vv. 26-27). But the servant turns around and exacts payment from his underling (v. 28). Because everyone is socialized into the system of indebtedness, one gesture of grace alone is not enough to transform the system. Thus the king violently reasserts the rule of retribution (v. 34). This disturbing tale serves as a warning to us about the consequences of giving in to the logic of retribution. Only by experimenting with the truth of God’s unlimited grace in concrete circumstances of conflict can the church offer an alternative to the world’s spiral of violence.

Matthew 18 provides important theological grounding for contemporary church involvement in conflict transformation and restorative justice. The church needs to practice this in its own life and then be a model for the wider society.

ⁱ See for example Marlin Jeshke, Discipling in the Church: Recovering a Ministry of the Gospel. Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1988.

ⁱⁱ J. Andrew Overman, Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990. p.160.

ⁱⁱⁱ William R. Herzog II, Parables of Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994.

Note: For a detailed treatment of these themes, see Myers and Enns, Ambassadors of Reconciliation, Vol. I (Orbis, 2009), chapter 3.