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~ Matthew 18:15-20 ~

Rev. Aneeta Devi Saroop

Assistant to the Bishop, DEI, British Columbia Synod

"If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. But 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. If that person 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. 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. Again, 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Let us pray: God who calls us by your Spirit into community, enliven us with your holy Word, that we might become your grace for one another and for this world. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Rock and our Redeemer, Amen.

~

"Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

We know that verse. It's one of those sayings of Jesus that has found its way into the everyday vocabulary of the church. We say it when attendance is smaller than we hoped. We say it at a committee meeting when only three people show up. We say it with affection and sometimes a little humour: few but mighty. Small in number, perhaps, but Christ is here.

And that is true. Across the ELCIC, many congregations know what it is to gather in smaller numbers than generations before us. Some are growing in new ways. Some are merging into beautiful new life. Some are closing their doors with grace and gratitude. Others are discovering new ministries in buildings that once held far more people on Sunday mornings. Many are asking what faithfulness looks like now.

And wherever two or three are gathered in Christ's name, Christ promises to be there.

But in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus does not speak these words as a sentimental reassurance about attendance. He is teaching about community. About conflict. About responsibility. About what we do when someone is hurt.

Because even where two or three are gathered, there can be conflict. Wherever human beings gather, we bring all of ourselves: generosity and kindness, histories and hopes, fear and pride, old wounds and assumptions. We bring different understandings of what is right, fair, faithful, biblical, necessary, or simply *"the way we have always done it."*

And sooner or later, somebody gets hurt.

Anyone who has ever tried to move a large piece of furniture through a narrow doorway knows how quickly a simple task can become a test of relationships. At first everyone is optimistic. *"It'll fit."* *"Turn a little."* *"No, your other left!"* *"Lift your end."* *"I am lifting my end!"* Before long, the sofa is wedged in the doorway, and everyone is certain the problem is the person giving directions. No one is acting maliciously. The trouble is that no one can see the whole picture. The person at the front sees the doorframe but not the staircase. The person at the back sees the staircase but not the corner ahead. Each is working with a partial view.

Church communities can be like that. We are trying to carry something precious together: the Gospel, our ministries, traditions, theology, memories and hopes for the future. And sometimes we get stuck. One person sees a danger another cannot see. One person experiences an exclusion another has never experienced. One hears a comment as harmless while another hears it through a lifetime of being told they do not quite belong. When we are stuck, the question is not simply, *"Who is right?"* The deeper question is, *"How will we care for one another while we find a way through?"* That is the question Jesus is asking in Matthew 18.

We often read verses 15 through 20 as a procedure: if someone sins against you, speak with them privately. If they will not listen, take one or two others. If that does not work, bring the matter to the church. There is wisdom here. Jesus does not tell us to gossip about the person or build a coalition against them. Jesus begins with relationship. Go to them. Speak truthfully. Listen. Seek restoration. The goal is not victory. The goal is to *"regain"* the other.

But we miss something important if we begin at verse 15. At the beginning of Matthew 18 the disciples ask Jesus, *"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"* Jesus answers by placing a child among them. Not a powerful person. Not the biggest donor. Not the person who has been Lutheran for the most generations. He places a child before them.

Jesus places someone with little social power at the center. Then he warns his followers not to cause *"these little ones"* to stumble. Then he tells the story of a shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to search for the one. And then comes today's teaching about conflict.

The whole chapter is about the shape of a community that refuses to treat people as disposable, especially the little one, especially the one who is easiest to lose.

This changes how we hear the Gospel.

Conflict in the church is not always a disagreement between two equally powerful people. Sometimes one person has the microphone, and another does not. One has deep roots in the congregation, and another has just walked through the door. One knows exactly how decisions get made and another does not even know where the washroom is.

Sometimes one person can walk away from a difficult conversation perfectly comfortable, while another is left wondering whether there is still a place for them in the church at all.

Jesus' teaching cannot become a weapon requiring vulnerable people to confront those who have harmed them without protection or support. Reconciliation is not pretending there was no harm. Forgiveness is not enabling abuse. Peace is not silence. A church is not healthy simply because nobody is arguing.

Sometimes silence means that people with the least power have learned that speaking is too costly. Jesus has already placed the little one at the center, and that takes us back even further in Matthew's Gospel to the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus announces blessing among the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful and the peacemakers. Jesus does not begin by blessing the strongest, the most influential or the most secure. He announces blessing among people the world so often fails to hear and notice.

So how are we ensuring care of the most vulnerable among us? Not in theory. Not in words on our websites about welcome. How are we caring for people in the actual life of our congregations?

Who can speak and be believed? Who is expected to adapt? Whose needs are treated as inconvenient? Who cannot hear because the sound system has not been repaired? Who cannot afford the event we assume everyone can attend? Who enters our doors wondering whether they will be received as a gift or treated as a problem? Who is missing from the room, and have we ever asked why? Jesus puts the little one in the middle. That is not pity or tokenism. It is a reordering of the community around the values of the Kingdom of God.

I learned something about that 28 years ago as a young mother in the congregation where my children and I were baptized. When my eldest daughter was a toddler, a friend from work invited me to check out her church. I had never really belonged to a church community before. My son, who was five, happily went off to Sunday school, but my daughter wanted nothing to do with it. She wasn't comfortable in the nursery or being away from me, so I carried her into worship.

I was already self-conscious. I didn't know the culture or the rules, and I worried about every toddler noise that came from my little one. A beautifully dressed woman with a big smile came over. *"You know,"* she said, *"we have a nursery."*

In that moment, I heard something she may never have intended. I heard: Your child is disruptive. You do not know how things work here. There is a proper place for people like you, and it is somewhere else.

For reasons I still understand as the work of the Holy Spirit, I went back the next week. My daughter clung to me again. I brought her into worship again. And the same woman came towards us. *"You know, we have a nursery."* This time, my sleep-deprived patience disappeared. *"Yes," I said, "you made sure and told me last week!"* She turned and walked away—in nice shoes, I might add. I felt terrible. I had only been to church twice and had already snapped at a church lady. I decided I would go back one final time, apologize, and then never return.

After worship I saw her near the coffee. Before I could get to her, she came toward me. She greeted my daughter, admired her curls and said, *"I have to apologize to you."* I was stunned. I told her I had been coming to apologize to her! She told me she had been thinking about what she had said and how she had said it. She remembered when her own daughter was little and realized how her words might have felt. Then this vibrant, lovely woman declared in her strong French-Canadian accent: *"If someone had said to me what I said to you, I would have probably punched them in the nose!"*

I laughed and felt the tension flowing away like a river. In that moment, something happened. We saw each other. She saw a tired young mother who did not yet know whether the church had room for her. I saw a woman willing to reconsider her words and move toward me rather than away. She told me she was glad my children and I were there.

I ended up staying at that church.

This is what is at stake in the relationships Jesus describes. Sometimes *"regaining"* a person is as simple and as difficult as caring enough to notice the impact we have had on them. It is being willing to say, *"I did not understand before, but I am listening now."* Or, *"I hurt you."* Or simply, *"I was wrong."* It is being willing to hear that someone experienced our beloved community differently than we did.

And for those who have been harmed, reconciliation does not require pretending everything is fine. Sometimes faithfulness means bringing others into the conversation. Sometimes it means boundaries. Sometimes it means saying clearly that behaviour which diminishes, intimidates, abuses or excludes another child of God cannot be covered over in the name of church harmony.

Jesus says, *"Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* What are we binding? What are we loosening?

Are we binding burdens onto people that Christ would have us remove? Binding silence onto people whose stories need to be heard? Or are we loosening fear? Loosening shame? Loosening the belief that someone must earn their place among us? Loosening our need to be right so that relationship might have room to breathe?

Across the ELCIC we are living through change, and change can make communities anxious. When resources are stretched, attendance shifts, buildings require decisions and familiar patterns no longer work, it is easy to turn inward—to become preoccupied with survival. Martin Luther would say *incurvatus in se*—*"curved in on itself."*

And when survival becomes the church's primary goal, vulnerable people can quickly become invisible. Caring takes time. Listening takes time. Accessibility can cost money. Repairing harm is inconvenient. Making room changes the room. But Jesus never calls the church merely to survive. Jesus calls us to love.

"Owe no one anything," Paul writes, *"except to love one another."* Love isn't surface niceness or avoiding difficult conversations. Love is the brave work of seeking the good of the other. It is telling the truth in ways that leave open the possibility of restoration. It is protecting those who are at risk. It is refusing to sacrifice the vulnerable simply to preserve the appearance of peace.

Beloved people of God, the church is not called to be a conflict-free community. The church is called to be a Christ-shaped community. A conflict-free community may simply be one where nobody dares to speak. A Christ-shaped community can tell the truth. It can repent. It can forgive. It can create healthy boundaries. It can change. It can ask, again and again: Who is the little one in our midst? Who is the one sheep? Who is paying the greatest price for the way things are now? And then we, as the Body of Christ, can move toward them. Because that is where Jesus has already gone. *"Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."*

Maybe the promise is not only that Jesus shows up whenever Christians gather. Maybe it is also a promise about where we will recognize him. The church is the people gathered here right now. The Holy Spirit has called us together in this time and these places to be the Body of Christ. Not the church of our memories. Not the church we imagine we will become once we finally have enough of everything. The church is right now. And Christ is among us right now. Not to bless the status quo, but to keep drawing us towards God and towards one another. To help us recognize truth and proclaim it in Christ. To call us back when we wander. To place the little one in the center. To loosen what binds and bind us instead to mercy, justice, forgiveness and love.

God knows every one of us—our weaknesses, failures, histories and fears, and all the ways we are being stretched and grown by God. And God continues to gather us around the Water, the Word and the Table of Grace, feeding our hunger, nourishing us with care as we become God's loving care for others in this world.

May our congregations become places where the most vulnerable do not merely receive our charity but help us recognize the very shape of God's kingdom. May those Jesus calls blessed find themselves blessed among us. May the little ones know they belong.

And may the church, in all its changing forms, become ever more fully the community Christ calls us to be.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.