

Matthew 18:15-20

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹⁵“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.”

Romans 13:8-14

⁸Owe 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.

Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans ⁸Owe no one anything, (double negative in Greek-believers should be debt free except with respect to love) so they should love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Christian love is other-directed as opposed to self-pleasuring. It is not a feeling but rather a good for all which is reflected in the fulfilling of the law. When we love God and love our neighbor we fulfill the law. The waters of our baptism cover a lifetime of sin. Because we are forgiven time and time again for multiple sins and the weight of sin has been lifted from us, we are free to extend such forgiveness to others. We then have what Martin Luther calls Christian freedom.

Because our belief in Christ opens up to us God's unconditional love and grace where we are held blameless in God's eyes we can freely do that for others (forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us) knowing that whatever happens to us our belief in Christ gives us eternal life.

Whatever happens, everything will be fine. A genocide was ignited in Rwanda on April 6, 1994, when a plane carrying President Juvénal Habyarimana was shot down and crashed in the capital, Kigali, killing the Rwandan leader, a Hutu. Rwanda's Tutsi minority was blamed for the crash, igniting a killing spree of revenge attacks targeting Tutsis across the country of 12 million people. A 100-day genocide that killed an estimated 800,000 ethnic Tutsis men, women and children *and* Hutus who tried to protect them. They even killed their friends and neighbors. Never mind very few could have had anything to do with the plane crash.

What is chilling to me is Rwanda was held up as a country where masses were newly baptized and yet many of the newly baptized chopped up their neighbors. In *Left to Tell*, Immaculée Ilibagiza shares of her experience during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. When I heard her talk she worked for the United Nations. She survived hidden for 91 days with seven other women in a small bathroom, no larger than 3 feet by 4 feet (an area of 12 square feet). The bathroom was concealed in a room behind a wardrobe in the home of a [Hutu](#) pastor. They had to remain still and silent while they heard neighbors were looking to chop them up. During the genocide, most of Ilibagiza's family (her mother, her father, and her two brothers Damascene and Vianney) were killed by Hutu [Interahamwe](#) soldiers. Besides herself, the only other survivor in her family was her brother Aimable, who was studying out of the country in [Senegal](#) and did not know of the genocide. Ilibagiza tells how her faith guided her through her ordeal and describes her eventual forgiveness and compassion toward her family's killers.

I work with someone who was gleeful his church had kicked out a member who was creating problems in the congregation. The church had followed the steps given in today's Gospel. "Someone had gone to them when the two were alone. Since they did not respond they took two others with them as witnesses. Because they still did not respond they involved the whole congregation who felt the person refused to listen so they kicked them out of the church.

We are not a reality show like Big Brother and Survivor, groups of strangers are put together in a certain location for a certain period of time and expected to figure out how to live together. The object is to vote each other out one by one in dramatic fashion until only one person remains. We as a faith community are also

together in a certain location for a certain period of time and we have to figure out how to live together and love one another. No easy task. Some behaviors are inappropriate in the life of the church because they could hurt the community, but the way we are called to treat each other is with forgiveness and love—not with votes “off the island.”

Do you think they dealt with the ambiguity of letting someone being to them as Jesus said “a Gentile and a tax collector?” How does Jesus treat Gentiles and Tax Collectors? Those are the folks Jesus associates with. He doesn’t treat them as outcasts but embraces them. There are no outsiders. All of us are insiders. To be “gathered in my name” is to be gathered in the spirit of forgiveness. Two or three people can get together in many locations. That doesn’t necessarily make them united in Christ. Instead, we are united in Christ when we forgive and love each other.

As Paul says, we put on the armor of light when we put on Jesus Christ, we become like Jesus. I know we spend time picking out just the right clothes. Do we spend as much time and care putting on Jesus? We may judge one another but we all stand before the judgment of God. Yet we do sin against one another, and Jesus’ challenges that we forgive seventy-seven times reveals God’s boundless mercy. Who in your life haven’t you been able to forgive? Is there anyone who has asked for forgiveness and you have not forgiven? The good news is that God’s forgiveness is not based on our idea of fairness, but rather on an abundant, unimaginable grace. As we pray the Lord’s Prayer, our asking for forgiveness is directly tied to our own willingness to forgive others: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” Thank goodness we cannot or do not have to give forgiveness on our own. We draw upon the Spirit in helping us forgive. Where we, and Peter, might have difficulty forgiving a mere seven times, Jesus reminds us that his kind of forgiveness can be measured on an exponential scale. Jesus forgiveness is deep enough for all people and all matters of sin. If we find ourselves struggling to extend forgiveness to others, we can return to the baptismal font which overflows with God’s love and which we can draw on for endless forgiveness.

When we remember our baptism, we realize not only are we forgiven but we are to be the ones to bring forgiveness to the world. Not forgiving another person can be harmful to us while forgiving others will set us free. We can replace anger and resentment with love and compassion. Who in your life haven’t you been able to forgive, regardless if they have asked for forgiveness or not? Now is the time to forgive! Amen.