

Sermon on Matthew 18:15-20
14th Sunday after Pentecost, September 10, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Living by the Rule of Law, or By the Law of Love?

So, we are going to get right to it, today. When someone does wrong to you, what do you do? Do you feel sorry for yourself, but remain silent? Do you scream into a pillow at home? Do you call a friend and complain, on the phone, over coffee or at the local pub? Do you go on Facebook and protest to cyberspace? Or do you find a way to get even, directly or indirectly, and fight back? Do you find a way to “hit back hard, very hard” and get your revenge, like they do out “in the world”? Or do you confront the person or persons in a healthy way, according to some kind of open and civil process, out in the open, to try to resolve the problem and reconcile your differences?

In the gospel Jesus advises his disciples, who evidently have found themselves in a conflict situation with each other. They had just come to Jesus asking him, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus had put a child before them, and said “*unless you change and become humble like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*” Jesus offered a better way: “*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. 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 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.*” (In other words, let them be separated as in a divorce due to irreconcilable differences!) In the interest of full transparency, these wise words of Jesus are found in our church by-laws as our grievance procedure – as they are in many congregations. The best way to resolve conflict between two persons is to start one-to-one in a respectful conversation (not “*mano i mano*” in a fight behind the bar, “taking it outside”, or in a thousand silent cuts of passive aggression or gossip behind one’s back, which is too often the Minnesota “nice” way of NOT resolving conflict! We don’t resolve conflict, we “get even”! That’s an age-old human problem; Jesus calls it *sin*. However, we are presently in a battle in our own nation over which will win: the philosophy of always getting even, or the power of love. Right now, the notion of revenge seems to have the upper hand. One very powerful person in Washington D.C. right now has said many times publicly, “*Get even with people. If they screw you, screw them back ten times as hard. You do it not only to get the person who messed with you but also to*

show the others who are watching what will happen to them if they mess with you. If someone messes with you, do not hesitate. Go for the jugular."

This is a dominant philosophy in the corporate business world and in politics, as in war, because it's all about winning, attaining wealth and getting power over others. This is not, however, what our Christian faith tells us to do. We are called to resist evil, in all its forms. The God of mercy instructs us to reach out to one another when we are wronged or do wrong, so that we can reconcile and be in a relationship of love and respect for our neighbors, and all human beings. This is a far greater challenge to us, because our natural "human" instinct is to get mad and get even, to take revenge and "even the score". That human principle is simple: in the jungle, only the strong survive.

Upon what principle, then, does Jesus base his teaching of love and reconciliation, as the better way? Again, we go back to the scripture, to our second lesson from Romans, where the apostle Paul writes:

"Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The 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." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

Human beings have a hard time grasping that love, as Jesus teaches it, is the greater power and fulfillment of God's law, more than simply obeying the letter of the law, and living by the principles of power in the world. Because we're living in this world right now, and we see the examples of seeking power over others and getting even every day. Not only on the world stage or on the evening news, but in our daily lives: at work, at home, in our communities, and even in church! Yes, even in church! Some of you have experienced "power over others" and "law over gospel" most harshly in the church, and it is a great example of faith in the primary principle of God's love that you haven't left the church forever!

I remember how in the year 2013 the issue of making marriage legal for persons who are gay or lesbian was up for debate in the Minnesota legislature. I went to the state capitol to hear the debates, see the people from both sides of the issues come to demonstrate in the rotunda, and found myself in many conversations with people who had strong convictions. Why else would they be there? Some found it unimaginable that society could allow any human beings to disobey God's law in the Ten Commandments, in their view that love and marriage could only be between a man and a woman. Following this law was the only way to be a Christian, or a law-abiding citizen, they said. But others argued that God created all human beings as they are, whatever their orientation, and the love we have for one another is a gift from God. How can other people, much less the state, deny our freedom to love one whom God has given us to love? Whether it is loving your neighbor as

yourself, loving your family, or loving your companion and partner for life, the higher principle is this: *love is the fulfillment of the law.*

So now “love is the law” in Minnesota. But not everyone accepts this.

So it is upon this principle of love for others – not only your family but also your neighbor – even those with whom you are in conflict – that Jesus taught his disciples, and all who follow him, not to “get even” with “an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth”. That only leaves the whole world blind and toothless – as Gandhi often said. The only way to resolve conflict in a way that follows God’s highest law of love is to seek reconciliation with our neighbor, to bring our grievances directly to each other, and seek forgiveness or to forgive, with justice.

As Christians who follow Jesus, our responsibility is to live by this teaching both in our individual lives and as a Church, in society. You can look at this text through a “macro lens” or a “micro lens”. In other words, it has a personal application, and a more universal application. We can naturally see how this fits in our personal relationships – whether we feel a family member has wronged us, or our neighbor has, or someone who works with us, even a person who worships with us in church. In such cases if we can’t resolve it ourselves, we are bound to follow civil procedures which will guide us to reconciliation. Sometimes a third person is needed to help us do that. But if we first love the other, reconciliation is much easier to accomplish! (Or maybe it’s harder – because emotions are higher!)

But as people of faith, our task is also to be a witness to the world for the principle of love in conflict resolution and reconciliation. We can see today how dangerous it is for people to live in fear of others harming them (whether the fear is real or imagined). It is dangerous for world leaders to make threats against nations that challenge our power or disrespect our nation. The art of diplomacy also makes use of those skills Jesus lifted up, of going directly to the offending party first individually, then in front of others, or before a court. The goal must always be to reconcile differences, and gain an ally or friend with understanding – rather than using threats, which all too often lead nations or the world into war. Just read *The Guns of August*, by Barbara Tuchman, who described how world leaders made foolish decisions and threats and fell into World War I as a result. Time and again the stakes have been shown to be too high to let threats or revenge lead us, instead of the goal of reconciliation and understanding. We can choose death – or life.

So Jesus says, “*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.*” When we forgive one another, our forgiveness binds us forever. If we do not forgive, we are also damned to the consequences. To go on without forgiveness or reconciliation can leave us with centuries of enmity and hate, as we see in the Middle East, with Israelis and Palestinians for example, or generational feuds. We can see how the lack of true reconciliation has left us in white America with unresolved issues of

racism and enmity for Native Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans and other people of color. This is our sin. When we leave our issues with one another unresolved, our sins without repentance, our wrongs not addressed, we let hatreds simmer and trust or understanding impossible. This is where we are today, and we are seeing the consequences occur almost daily, with more harm being done, lives destroyed, human beings left invisible and children without hope. It hurts us all.

The one positive thing about the conflict we are now seeing expressed in the open is that now we cannot deny that it is there! Unless you close your eyes and ears or live in a cave somewhere, you have to admit we have a problem in this nation that needs to be addressed with honesty and humility. The alternative is forever seeking revenge or getting even, which will bring us all down.

So I take hope in how our problems and issues as a nation are so public and undeniable right now! We have to address them to survive! But if our principle is to seek reconciliation and understanding as the goal, and if we believe that love is the fulfilling of the law, then we are on the right path of God! Paul says, *“The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light!”* We can take heart that whatever you and I bind on earth with forgiveness and love, will be bound in heaven! Living by love as the law, we open our church to families who need emergency housing, every month of March. We stand with “dreamers” who are protected through DACA, and we speak up to protect undocumented immigrants, our neighbors, God’s children, from arrest and deportation by those who follow only the rule of law, but do not live by love. Today we make our choice, to live by the highest law of God’s love. It’s a choice with consequences. But it all starts with faith in God’s love.

We also take hope that God is with us, through the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, *“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.”* Reconciliation and forgiveness have power! *“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”* Jesus is present with us, to help guide us to reconciliation, when we reach out to one another in faith. The sign for us of Jesus’ presence is in the bread and wine of holy communion, where Jesus promises to be with us: *“this is my body, this is my blood, given and shed for you.”* Jesus lived among us and died for the sake of reconciling us to God and to one another. Let us live as Jesus did, for our neighbors as well as ourselves, and trust in his abiding presence, for the healing of the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.

For all who are suffering from hurricane, earthquake, fire and flood in Mexico, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, California, Texas, Montana, Florida, Cuba, Puerto Rico,

St. Martin, the Virgin Islands and all Caribbean islands, we ask that you make us generous in our support as they heal and rebuild. Protect our neighbors in Florida as they endure Hurricane Irma's fury today, and help them to return home.