

Sermon: Listening for Salvation

Year A, Proper 18

[Ezekiel 33:7-11](#); [Psalm 119:33-40](#); [Romans 13:8-14](#); [Matthew 18:15-20](#)

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My condo association loves rules. They love making them and putting them in newsletters. Sometimes they're posted; often times they're not. It's an 80 unit building. Pets are allowed, so many of the rules are about pets. For instance, there is an actual rule about not letting your dog do its business in the elevator. And there's a rule that says that pet owners can't use the common laundry room in the basement because there are people in the building who are allergic to animals.

I get the reasoning behind both rules. But both are completely unenforceable. I can tell you from personal experience that both rules get broken. But the elevator rule gets broken a lot less frequently than the laundry room rule. We can debate why that is, but I think a good portion of it is the amount of love in the building. It's not huge. You should see the notes that get written when someone parks in someone else's assigned space. They had to make a rule about no anonymous notes next to the mailboxes because the kids in the building were getting quite a vocabulary lesson. So there's enough love in my building to keep the elevators basically clean, but not enough to prevent the dryer filters being completely clogged with dog hair. We love our neighbors, but we don't love them that much.

Paul was talking about the rules that the new Christian communities lived with. They had rules about adultery, murder, stealing, coveting. (Romans 3:9) I'm sure those rules worked, at least most of the time. Just like our rules. But logically, they didn't work all the time, or there wouldn't have been rules at all. Just like our rules. What Paul was arguing for was that the rules didn't bring salvation. Following the rules didn't bring salvation. Love alone didn't bring salvation. It was building a community based on love, built on behavior that you'd want everyone to see when you were stone cold sober, built on the decisions you'd make when you were being whom Jesus was calling you to be, not who your hormones and your earthly desires drove you to be. Paul was talking about salvation coming to individuals who had committed to each other, committed to the community they had formed together.

Jesus was talking about that kind of community too. There's a bit of historical sleight of hand happening in the reading from Matthew. There's no reason to think that Jesus ever expected to create anything other than a flourishing Jewish community. So when we see him speak of the "church" here, that's most likely someone from the later Christian communities reading something in to something he said.¹

But Jesus expected that those who followed his message would be in communities and in communion with one another. So the section where he lays out what to do if you have been wronged by someone does appear to come from him, not someone later. Notice right up front that he expected there to be friction, people being sinned against, people being accused, people being offended. Think about that for a minute.

There is an image of churches being pink cloud, no conflict, nothing but smooth sailing places. I don't know any places like that, especially not ones that have humans in them. And Christians

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*. Vol. 2. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 187.

are humans. So wherever those images come from of church being a place where no one's feelings get hurt, it's not from Jesus. He's building in, right up front, a procedure for handling what happens when regular humans get together.² Even the ones who are actively working for the Kingdom of God. Perhaps *especially* the ones who are actively working for the Kingdom of God.

Next thing to notice: the person who is offended goes and searches out the person who hurt their feeling. We don't get to hang back and play the "nothing" game. "What's wrong?" "Nothing." "What did I do wrong?" "Nothing." We have to put into words what's bothering us. And we have to be able to point out the fault (Matthew 18:15). Does that sound familiar to anyone with kids? We use "I" sentences and use specific examples. And maybe that works. "Oh man, I had no idea you'd feel that way. It was never my intention, but I can see how you'd take it that way. I'm so sorry."

But it might not work. So you go get another couple of witnesses. Now these are not witnesses to the offense. They're witnesses to the conversation.³ I have had people park in my parking spot at home. I am not prepared to imagine that they are dealing with a family emergency. In my mind they are lazy, selfish jerk faces and I should let the air out of their tires. Having a couple witnesses to the confrontation would help reign me in.

If that doesn't work, then you go to the wider community. Maybe there is someone there who can see something the pair of you are missing. Maybe there is someone who can better articulate what the community norm is. Perhaps there is someone who can help fill a scarcity that both of you are struggling with. But perhaps, more than anything, there is someone there to remind you of what you're trying to be.

If that's the case, then what's with the final step of treating those who cannot agree like tax collectors and gentiles? Perhaps you can argue that there is some behavior that can merit exile. But think how Jesus treated tax collectors and gentiles.⁴ He was constantly trying to find a way to break through their reluctance, their preference to remain untouched by the love of God and the love of neighbor.

Because for both Jesus and his committed apostle Paul, it's the love that drives all the rest. It's the love of God and the love of neighbor that drives the action. For both those men, love is not an emotion, or not only an emotion. Love is what makes things happen.⁵ Love is what makes you pitch in to help with coffee hour because the deacons are flat out. Love is what makes you walk around with Jace during worship or mow the church lawn or help get stuff back up in the attic at the church. Love is what makes you show up for rehearsal on Friday night so you can

² Jin S. Kim, "Proper 18, Pastoral Perspective, Matthew 18:15-20" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 46.

³ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 214.

⁴ Charles Hambrick-Stow, "Proper 18, Theological Perspective, Matthew 18:15-20" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 48.

⁵ Rochelle A. Stackhouse, "Proper 18, Pastoral Perspective, Romans 13:8-14" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 40.

come to the all church meeting on Sunday. Love is what keeps you silent when someone is suggesting how to share what we have in this church with others, even when you have a really good idea yourself. Love is what makes you listen, not only to what is being said during our all church meeting, but what is not being said. Love is what makes you speak up about what you're not hearing and then really listen to other people's responses. Love is what lets you respect one another and respect how imperfectly we follow the Holy Spirit's guidance as we try to follow God's lead.

From our worship this morning we're going to go down and have an all church meeting where we're following up from what we talked about last January and again in May. I'm not worried about the listening to each other. You have demonstrated the phenomenal ability this church has to listen, truly listen with love to one another. We need to listen to one another, and then listen to our own hearts and the Holy Spirit. Something is coming into being in this church, something is opening up for this community because all of us are working together to make that something emerge. We don't yet know what it is, but we are listening and working and loving so hard to bring it into being. Not only today, but as we move forward as a community, keep the listening and the speaking and the witnessing coming. Because that is love in action. That is what Jesus is calling us to do. We will offend each other, we will be in conflict. If we're not, we probably don't care enough to have an opinion. But we can work through that conflict faithfully together. So long as we are listening together. Listening for salvation.