

Becoming a Humble Community

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Date: 26 February 2023

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture reading is from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 18, verses 1 to 20, as printed in the liturgy.

A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew. At that time, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? He called a little child to him and placed the child among them.

And he said, Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If anyone causes one of these little ones, those who believe in me, to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

[1 : 19] Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble. Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come. If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away.

It is better for you to enter life, maimed or crippled, than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my father in heaven.

What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way, your father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault just between the two of you.

[2 : 25] If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church.

And if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or 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 that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them.

This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Good morning, Christ Church. I wonder how many of you actually read operating instructions.

When you get a technological device, I saw three of you. You get a technological device, a phone, a computer, you get a new appliance, a car. How many of us read the instructions?

[3 : 33] How many of us actually just ignore the instructions, the operating instructions altogether? For that's most of us, we just kind of file them away in case we might need them in an emergency someday.

If you're like me, you've just tossed them in the trash, and you've thought, well, I can figure that out on my own if I ever need to. And if you're like me, you've done that many times, and you've found,

you know, it's actually okay.

I haven't really gotten into that much trouble ignoring the operating instructions. But I'd like to suggest that with things that are more important than a phone or a car, we really should pay attention to how that thing is supposed to operate.

So if you're running a nuclear reactor, let's say, if you're trying to run a family, if you're trying to run a church, you should really pay attention to this very powerful thing that could do great good in the world or that could do great damage in the world.

And today we're looking at Jesus' operating instructions for his church. We talked last week about Matthew chapter 16 where Jesus says, I'm going to build my church, and the gates of hell are not going to prevail against my church.

[4 : 49] I'm the builder, and I'm the protector of the church. And today we come to Jesus' more specific instructions for how the church is supposed to work. Now, as a reminder, in the Gospel of Matthew, there are five major sermons from Jesus, these great blocks of his preaching and his teaching.

So in Matthew chapter 5 through 7, we get the Sermon on the Mount, which is Jesus' sermon on the Christian life. In Matthew chapter 10, we get Jesus' sermon on Christian mission.

Matthew 13, we get Jesus' sermon on the kingdom of God. Andrew preached about that this past Wednesday night. Now we're in Matthew 18 to 20, his sermon on the church community.

And then you can read on to Matthew 23 to 25, his sermon on judgment. And there's really nothing more important for Christians and for churches than to really focus ourselves on these sermons.

What's the content of what Jesus preached, and how can we practice what he preached? And as we come to Matthew 18 to 20, Jesus' sermon on church community, Jesus is unfolding here for us in these next few weeks.

[5 : 58] We're going to be looking at the elements of love that make the church a community, a family, and how that works, how it operates properly and optimally.

And we know that Jesus is talking about the church here because he says so implicitly when he's talking about the flock and the sheep, that's a metaphor for the church.

When he's talking about the family of brothers and sisters, that's a metaphor for the church. And then he says explicitly two times in verse 17, I'm talking about my church.

And so Andrew's going to talk next week a little bit about these verses 15 to 20, but I want to talk today about verses 1 to 14 and what Jesus says are the operating instructions for his church.

How is my church that I'm building and that I'm protecting designed to work? And this text tells us that Jesus wants to build a humble, sacrificial, and retrieving church.

[7 : 10] First of all, Jesus builds a humble church. Verse 1 tells us that at that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked him, who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

And this question comes because Jesus has been talking to them about the kingdom of God. And every kingdom, as we know, has a certain structure, has a hierarchy. It has the greatest and the least.

In every kingdom you have people at the top, the middle, and the bottom. And so the disciples are saying, well, who's going to have the top positions in the kingdom? Who's going to have the highest honor in the kingdom of God?

Who's going to play the most important roles and get the most recognition? If you look in your pew Bibles, you'll see in the previous chapter, Jesus invited Peter, James, and John, just three of the 12 disciples, to come up with him on the mountain of transfiguration.

And so perhaps these other disciples that didn't get invited are feeling kind of aggrieved, right? And we can sense underneath this question, there's some sort of selfish ambition, some sort of vain conceit, some sort of prideful competition that's going on in Jesus' disciple community.

[8 : 19] And so how does Jesus respond to that question? And how does he respond to the attitudes underneath that question? Well, it says in verse 2 that he called a little child whom he placed among them, and he said, truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now, that's not shocking for us because we live in a child-centered society. Kids have a high status despite the fact that they're the smallest and the weakest among us, and I would argue that's because of Jesus and this great revolution that he launches here.

But that was not so in the Greco-Roman world. The child was the least significant human being you could possibly think of. And so this is an astonishing object lesson where Jesus just plops a kid right down in the middle of his disciple community, and he says, your idea of what is great is wrong.

This is greatness. And Jesus says, unless you change your whole attitude, unless you change your whole outlook to have the lowliness and the humility of this small child, you cannot even enter into the kingdom of God, much less be great within that kingdom.

This is Jesus' doctrine of what we call conversion. And Jesus is saying that, you know, you have to undergo a heart transplant because you cannot even gain access.

[9 : 57] You cannot even be admitted into the kingdom of God unless you have a humble heart. And this fits with his Sermon on the Mount. Remember how he begins that sermon.

What does he say? Blessed are the... Blessed are the... Okay, we've got to preach that sermon again. Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount, and he says, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who realize that they have absolutely nothing to offer to God. And then he ends that sermon, and he says, Small is the gate, and narrow is the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

And why is that gate that leads to life so hard to find? And why is that narrow gate so difficult to enter through? It's because you can't bring a big ego through it.

You can't bring all your pride through it. And Jesus is giving us kind of a clue about this in verse 4. He says, You see, the problem for us, left to our own selves, is that we love the first place.

[11 : 16] We love the best position. We love the highest and the greatest place, and not the lowly and the humble place. But Jesus is telling us that that pride that's in us is a sin that's so grave, that if it characterizes your life, he says, You cannot even enter in.

You can't be included. You cannot participate in the kingdom of heaven. Now, if Jesus diagnoses our heart problem and says that we are full of pride, well, what's his remedy?

What's his cure? And I think Jesus is suggesting here that we should ask God in his grace to change us, right, to give us a new heart that's childlike.

Not childish, but childlike. Childish is about being immature and irresponsible, and that's not what Jesus is saying. He's encouraging us to pray, Lord, make me something by your grace, other than what I am by nature, which is full of myself.

Give me a childlike heart that's able to take the lowly position, that's able to be in that humble place. And how does that typically happen?

[12 : 32] How does God typically answer that prayer? Well, God will typically give you a glimpse of himself. God will typically show you how great and glorious he is, how majestic, how transcendent, how holy and how beautiful he is.

And when you have a glimpse of God, you can't help but feel small and insignificant and lowly and weak and humble like a little child before his awesome presence.

And you see, what does a little child know about themselves? A little child knows that they're not an autonomous creature, right?

They know that, in fact, they're dependent creatures, that they rely on their parents for absolutely everything that they need to live. And I think Jesus is suggesting here that only a childlike, humble, dependent, trustful heart can do something like pray the Lord's Prayer.

Right? Because that's a child's prayer. How does it start? Our Father. Our Father. Abba, Father. In heaven, I depend upon you for all that I am and all that I have.

[13 : 54] I depend upon you for my bread and all things physical. I depend upon you for forgiveness and all things spiritual. I depend upon you for deliverance from evil and all things moral.

And Jesus is wanting us to think about this as a disciple community. Do we pray like a little child? And are we putting ourselves in this lowly position, in this humble place before our Father on a regular basis?

Because that's Jesus' definition of true greatness in his kingdom. You see, the disciples ask this question, who's the greatest in the kingdom of God?

And Jesus' answer is, well, whoever's taken the humblest place and the lowest place of all. And who is that actually? Who's taken the humblest place and the lowest place in the kingdom of God? It's Jesus himself. The Apostle Paul says in Philippians 2, he says, Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking out for your

own interests, but each of you to the interests of the others.

[15:06] In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset that Christ Jesus had when he made himself nothing and he humbled himself and he became obedient to death, even death on a shameful cross.

And you see, if the highest one, Jesus Christ, became the lowest one, isn't this what his disciples are to be like as well? That if the greatest one, Jesus, became the humblest one, shouldn't this be one of the most distinctive marks and characteristics of his church community?

And that's the kind of church he wants to build here. He wants to build a humble church. People who take the lowliest positions and say, that's greatness.

But Jesus not only wants to build a humble church, he wants to build a sacrificial church. A sacrificial church. He shifts his focus now from our inward character in verses 1 to 4.

He now begins to talk about our outward conduct in verses 5 to 9. And he's basically saying, look, our humility before God should be expressed in our humility before others in the church with our fellow disciples.

[16:24] That this attitude of humility as we relate to one another serves as evidence and as a sign and an indicator that God has, in fact, worked a change of heart within us.

Listen to what he says in verse 5. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If anyone causes one of these little ones, those who believe in me, to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were drowned in the depths of the sea.

When Jesus is speaking here about the child and these little ones, he's not still talking about the actual child that he's brought before them as an object lesson. Rather, he's saying that the childlike disciples who trust in me, these are the children, these are the little ones, and what he's saying is I want you to treat one another like you would treat me.

When you welcome a brother or sister in Christ, when you warmly receive them, when you accept them in my name, when you go out of your way and you overcome barriers and you extend yourself to welcome one another with encouragement and support and service, Jesus says you are actually welcoming me.

And what if we're not relating to each other like we would relate to Jesus? Well, that's why Jesus begins to give us this worrying warning about this millstone tied around our necks.

[17:57] What in the world does that mean? Jesus is saying there, I want you to take care that you do not injure the faith of my people in my church. I want you to do no harm to your brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

I want you to do nothing to hurt their faith. I want you to care so much for your fellow disciples in this community that you care for them more than you care about yourself.

Jesus is saying I don't want you to cause any fellow Christian to stumble in their relationship with the Lord. And I don't want you to trip people up in their way that God wants them to walk and wants them to live as they're following me.

In fact, Jesus says if you hurt the faith of one little disciple in my church, then death by drowning is better than what you're going to experience on judgment day.

Ooh, this is awful. This is what the Apostle Paul is saying in his letter to the Romans. In Romans 14, he says, Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.

[19:11] And he goes on in Romans 16, he says, I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching that you have learned.

You see, what Jesus is saying here in Matthew 18 and what Paul is saying in his letter to the Romans is that it's possible to hurt Jesus' disciple community by failing to be for one another theologically and morally and spiritually, all the things that the New Testament calls us to be for one another.

And this is why Jesus shifts his focus from not just what's causing fellow disciples to stumble, but what causes you to stumble, he says. Because if you're tripping your own self up and you're causing yourself to stumble, you're surely going to cause other people in my church to stumble.

And so he says, I want you to pay serious attention to yourself. Examine yourself according to these words in verse 8. If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away.

It's better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It's better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

[20 : 36] This is the most loving person in the universe who talks the most about this doctrine of hell. And do you know who he talks the most about this doctrine with?

His disciples. Not the pagan world, not the crowds. He warns his disciples, his believers, his people of faith most severely because he wants to motivate them here in this case to get rid of whatever is causing you to stumble and get rid of it immediately.

Whatever is hurting your faith or the faith of others must go, Jesus says. If it's your hand and what you do, if it's your foot and where you go, if it's your eye and what you see.

Or you could go down the rest of the list of our body parts. If it's your ear and what you hear, if it's your tongue and the things that you're saying, if it's your mind and what you're thinking, if it's your heart and what you're desiring, Jesus says you need to identify that thing that's causing you to stumble and you need to kill it.

Because if you don't kill it, it is going to kill you and it's going to kill my whole disciple community. And Jesus isn't saying literally to cut off and to gouge out body parts.

[21 : 56] He's exaggerating like the millstone to make a point. And he's saying that, look, sin is like gangrene. If you do not take drastic action, if you do not lose your foot or lose your hand, no matter how precious it is to you, you will ultimately lose your life.

There's hardly anything that's more valuable to a working person than their hands and than their feet. These are not bad things. These are good things that God created.

But Jesus is saying that anything that's diminishing faith in yourself or in other people, anything that's causing you to stumble and not walk closely and consistently with God has got to go.

This is a good place to begin Lent, I think. Because you might think of a good thing in your life, a really good gift that God's given you, and you've allowed that good thing to push God off to the side, to the periphery.

You've allowed that thing to become the first thing in your life, and God has somehow now become the second thing or the third thing. Or you might think of an attitude in your heart that's killing you and will kill you if you do not remove it.

[23 : 14] I thought this week about this verse in Ephesians chapter 4, where the Apostle Paul says, Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you along with all malice.

We talked about pride. Let's talk a little bit about anger. Frederick Buechner says this. He says, Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun.

To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last twosome morsel both the pain that you are given and the pain you are giving back.

In many ways, it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback, he says, is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. And the skeleton at the feast is you.

You know, if you've ever tried to break a bad moral habit like anger, you know that it feels like cutting off your hand or your foot. Right? If you've ever tried to stop a bad attitude toward a fellow Christian that you're called to love, you know that it can be almost as hard as plucking out your eye.

[24 : 34] And Jesus knows that the discipleship he's calling us to here, it's a costly discipleship. He knows that if we're going to become like him theologically and spiritually and morally, it's going to hurt.

Jesus, of all people, knows the pain of what he's talking about. Right? Jesus didn't have his hands and his feet cut off with sharp objects, but Jesus did have his hands and his feet pierced with nails. Right? He himself and his body and his soul was cut off on his cross. Right? He went through these fires of hell. He lost his very life.

Why did he do that? In order to save us from sin, so that we could walk with God without stumbling anymore. And so Jesus has earned the right to call his disciples, to call his disciple community to selfless sacrifice for the sake of one another, so that we can be a healthy church community where the humility of Christ is on display, where the welcome of Christ is on display, where the love of Christ is on display, where the holiness of Christ is obviously invisibly on display for other people to see among us.

That's the kind of church he wants to build, a humble church and a sacrificial church. But finally, he also wants to build a retrieving church.

[26 : 05] Jesus wants to build a humble and a sacrificial and a retrieving church. This is verse 10. And Jesus says, See that you do not despise one of these little ones.

For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the 99 on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?

And in verse 14, he says, In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. Now again, when Jesus is talking about little ones, he means disciples. And when he's talking about the flock, he means the church. And Jesus is trying to show us the heart of God toward our fellow sheep in this flock in order to show us how we ought to relate to one another.

Jesus assumes that we're prone to wander. Disciples and Christians in the church, we're prone to wander off from the church. We're prone to wander off from the faith. And how do we wander off?

[27 : 06] Well, we wander off theologically from the truth of God's word and we begin to adopt unbiblical ways of thinking. We wander off morally by living in ways that are not in line with the gospel, living in ways that are dishonoring to God and ignoring his commands.

We wander off spiritually. We sort of drift away from weekly worship and we slip off from the daily practices of scripture and prayer that will give us life.

We wander in so many ways. But Jesus is saying, I want you to have the same attitude that my father has for this flock, especially for the sheep who are prone to wander.

And what's the father's attitude? The father's attitude is, well, just let it go. It's just one sheep. We've got 99 more.

I mean, let's not worry about this odd, silly sheep that just keeps drifting away from the flock is probably not worth very much anyway. No, that's what Jesus means when he says, be careful that you do not despise one of these little ones as worthless and not valuable.

[28 : 18] Now, how does the father really think and feel? The father says, wait a minute. I had 100 sheep. Where's my one that's infinitely valuable to me?

He says in verse 14, your father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. My father loves to recover lost sheep.

My father delights in his heart when sheep are brought back into the fold and Jesus is saying, we should have the same attitude for one another in the church. If you're a Christian, it's because Jesus, the good shepherd, laid down his life for you on his cross.

He shed his blood to save you into this flock. But now, you're not only a sheep, you're also a shepherd. And every Christian is called to think and to act like a shepherd and to take spiritual responsibility for your fellow disciples, for the health and well-being of this flock so that if you see even one sheep that starts wandering off into dangerous territory, one sheep that starts drifting away into places where we know they will perish, what should you do?

Obviously, you should call Pastor Andrew and say, hey, this is your job. You deal with it. No, Jesus is telling us this story in his sermon about the church community to tell us, you go after them.

[29 : 52] You go and shepherd them in the way that your shepherd came after you. You know, when I was a kid growing up, we had this dog named Junior.

He wasn't the smartest dog. And he was pretty poorly behaved. Not his fault. We just didn't train him very well. But we would spend hours doing something he was really good at, and that was we'd throw the ball, we'd throw the stick, and without fail, I mean, he's a retriever, so he would retrieve the ball.

He would retrieve the stick. We'd be at the grass in our yard. We'd be at the lake in our neighborhood, and he just never grew tired of it. Just relentlessly, you'd throw it out, and he'd retrieve that ball and bring it back and say, here you are, master.

He was a good dog. He wasn't that smart, but he was good. And Jesus is saying, we should relate to one another in the way that Junior related to that ball.

We should be thinking to ourselves, the people in this flock. They're my fellow disciples. They've become my family in Jesus Christ.

[31 : 08] These brothers and sisters of mine, we have a bond of grace that's thicker even than ties of blood. We're bound together by the scriptures and the sacraments and the spirit of God.

We're bound together by worship and fellowship and mission. Jesus says the person sitting in the pew next to you, their angels in heaven, always see the face of Jesus' Father, which means that that person next to you that may be a little irritating, a little bit hard to love, they're exceedingly precious and valuable to God.

And if they start to wander away, if they start to slip off, if they start to drift, each one of us are to take spiritual responsibility for them to go after them, to seek them out, to find them, and to bring them back.

And this, of course, assumes that we're investing the time it takes to know each other, to be in each other's lives, to even realize that somebody's wandering off, much less to have the relational and the spiritual capital to go after them.

But Jesus is calling us to be junior. He's calling us to be retrievers. He's calling us to bring one another safely back into this fold that he loves so very much.

[32 : 34] So friends, that's the church that Jesus wants to build, a humble church, a sacrificial church, and a retrieving church. And may God grant us his grace to become that by the power of his spirit and under the authority of his word.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.