

Gospel and Sermon Transcript - 15th Sunday After Pentecost - September 6, 2026

00:00

This long season of Pentecost means words for the church.

00:04

And the word of the day is "recognition" from Matthew's Gospel.

00:10

And this isn't

00:30

the sermon but it is something to think about over the next few weeks. Today we

00:34

take up reconciliation and in coming weeks forgiveness. What does that mean?

00:43

We'll ponder that over the next few weeks I think. The sermon today is written

00:48

by the assistant to the bishop in the British Columbia Senate. Her portfolio

00:54

is diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Reverend Anita Devis-Saudarup is the

01:01

writer and her perspective I think is one that only she can provide and the

01:10

prism through which she works will be not being a lifelong Lutheran, a mom,

01:17

someone of color, and a person of faith. So I think you will find her words today

01:24

very moving and penetrating in many ways. So we are grateful for this Sunday

01:31

sermon series that allows us some broader perspectives maybe than just one.

01:39

[Music]

02:25

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the 18th chapter.

02:38

If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you were listened to, you've regained

02:44

that one. But if you are not listened to, take care and take one or two others

02:52

along with you so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or

02:57

three witnesses. If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

03:03

and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to

03:10

you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you will bind

03:17

on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be

03:22

loosed in heaven. Again, I truly tell you, if two of you agree on earth about

03:29

anything you ask it will be done for you by my Father in heaven for where two or

03:35

three are gathered in my name I am there among them the gospel of our Lord

The Sermon

Grace and peace to you. These words are from the Reverend Anita Debbie Sogrub.

04:00

Where two or three are gathered in my name I am among them. We know that verse.

04:09

It's one of those sayings of Jesus that has found its way into the everyday

04:14

vocabulary of the church. We say it when attendance is smaller than we hoped. We

04:21

We say it at a committee meeting when only three people show up.

04:25

We say it with affection and sometimes a little humour.

04:30

Few but mighty, small in number, perhaps, but Christ is here.

04:38

And that is true.

04:40

Across the ELCIC, many congregations know what it is to gather in smaller numbers than

04:47

generations before us.

04:50

Some are growing in new ways.

04:52

Some are merging into beautiful new life.

04:55

Some are closing their doors with grace and gratitude.

05:01

Others are discovering new ministries and buildings that once held far more people on

05:06

Sunday mornings.

05:09

Many are asking what faithfulness looks like now.

05:14

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

05:22

But in Matthew's gospel, Jesus does not speak these words as sentimental

05:28

reassurance about attendance. He's teaching about community, about conflict,

05:35

about responsibility, about what we do when someone is hurt. Because even we're

05:44

two or three are gathered, there can be conflict.

05:48

Wherever human beings gather, we bring all of ourselves--

05:53

generosity and kindness, histories and hopes,

05:57

fear and pride, old wounds and assumptions.

06:02

We bring different understandings

06:04

of what is right, fear, faithful, biblical, necessary,

06:09

or simply the way we've always done it.

06:14

And sooner or later, somebody gets hurt.

06:19

Anyone who has ever tried to move a large piece of furniture

06:23

through a narrow doorway knows how quickly a simple task

06:27

becomes a test of relationships.

06:30

At first, everyone is optimistic.

06:33

It'll fit.

06:34

Turn a little.

06:35

No, your other left.

06:37

Lift your end.

06:39

I am lifting my end.

06:42

And before long, the sofa is wedged into the doorway,

06:47

and everyone is certain the problem

06:49

is the person giving directions.

06:52

No one is acting maliciously.

06:54

The trouble is, no one can see the whole picture.

06:57

The person at the front sees the door frame,

06:59

but not the staircase.

07:01

The person at the back sees the staircase,

07:03

but not the corner ahead.

07:05

Each is working with a partial view.

07:10

church communities could be like that.

07:12

We are trying to carry something precious together.

07:15

The gospel, our ministries, traditions, theology,

07:20

memories, hopes for the future,

07:22

and sometimes we get stuck.

07:25

One person sees a danger that another cannot see.

07:29

One person experiences an exclusion

07:32

another has never experienced.

07:35

One hears a comment as harmless,

07:38

while another hears it through a lifetime of being told,

07:42

they don't quite belong.

07:45

When we are stuck, the question is not simply who is right.

07:51

The deeper question is how will we care for one another

07:56

while we find our way through?

07:59

That is the question Jesus is asking in Matthew 18.

08:04

We often read verses 15 to 20 as procedure.

08:09

If someone sins against you, speak with them privately.

08:12

If they will not listen, take one or two others.

08:15

If that does not work, bring the matter to the church.

08:20

There is wisdom here.

08:22

Jesus does tell us not to gossip about the person

08:26

or build a coalition against them.

08:28

Jesus begins with relationship.

08:33

Go to them.

08:34

Speak truthfully.

08:36

Listen.

08:37

Seek restoration.

08:39

The goal is not victory.

08:42

The goal is to regain the other.

08:48

But we miss something important if we begin at verse 15.

08:52

At the beginning of Matthew 18,

08:54

the disciples asked Jesus,

08:58

who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

09:01

And Jesus answers by placing a child among them.

09:07

Not a powerful person, not the biggest donor,

09:11

not the person who has been in the Lutheran church

09:13

the longest, he places a child before them.

09:20

Jesus places someone with little social power at the center.

09:25

Then he warns his disciples not to cause

09:27

the little ones to stumble.

09:31

Then he tells the story of a shepherd who leaves 99 to go find the one.

09:39

Then comes today's teaching about conflict.

09:43

The whole chapter is about the shape of a community that refuses to treat people as

09:49

disposable, especially the little one, especially the one who is the easiest to lose.

09:57

changes how we hear the gospel. Conflict in the church is not always a

10:04

disagreement between two equally powerful people. Sometimes one person has

10:10

the microphone, another does not. One has deep roots in the congregation and the

10:16

other has just walked through the door. One knows exactly how decisions are made

10:21

and another doesn't even know where the washroom is. Sometimes one person can walk

10:29

away from a difficult conversation, perfectly comfortable, while another is

10:33

left wondering whether there is still a place for them in the church at all.

10:40

Jesus' teaching cannot be a weapon requiring vulnerable people to confront

10:46

those who have harmed them without protection or support. Reconciliation is

10:52

not pretending that there was no harm. Forgiveness is not enabling abuse. Peace

10:59

is not silence. The church is not healthy simply because nobody's arguing.

11:07

Sometimes silence means that people with the least power have learned that

11:12

speaking is too costly. Jesus has already placed the little one at the centre and

11:19

that takes us back even further into Matthew's gospel to the Sermon on the

11:25

Mount. Jesus announces a blessing among the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the

11:33

meek, those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful, the peacemakers. Jesus does

11:41

not begin by blessing the strongest, the most influential, or the most secure. He

11:48

announces blessing among people the world so often fails to hear and notice.

11:57

So how are we ensuring care of the most vulnerable among us? Not in theory, not in

12:05

words on our websites about welcome. How are we caring for people in the actual

12:10

life of our congregations? Who can speak and be believed? Who's expected to adapt?

12:20

Whose needs are treated as inconvenient? Who cannot hear because the sound system

12:26

has not been repaired? Who cannot afford the event we assume everyone can

attend?

12:32

Who enters our doors wondering whether they will be received as a gift or

12:37

were treated as a problem.

12:40

Who is missing from the room?

12:42

And have we ever asked why?

12:45

Jesus puts the little one in the middle.

12:49

That is not pity or tokenism.

12:52

It is a reordering of the community

12:56

around the values of the kingdom of God.

13:00

I learned something about that, Pastor Syrup writes.

13:03

28 years ago, as a young mother in the congregation

13:07

children and I were baptized. When my eldest daughter was a toddler, a friend from work

13:14

invited me to check out her church. I never really belonged to a church community before.

13:21

My son, who was 5, happily went off to Sunday school, but my daughter wanted nothing to

13:27

do with it. She wasn't comfortable in the nursery or being away from me, so I carried

13:32

her into worship. I was already self-conscious. I didn't know the culture or the rules and

13:39

I worried about every toddler noise that came from my little one. A beautifully dressed

13:47

woman with a big smile came over. "You know," she said, "we have a nursery." At that moment

13:57

I heard something she may have never intended.

13:59

I heard your child is disruptive.

14:03

You do not know how things work here.

14:06

There is a proper place for people like you,

14:10

and it's somewhere else.

14:14

For reasons that I still understand

14:16

as work of the Holy Spirit,

14:19

I went back the next week.

14:22

My daughter clung to me again.

14:24

I brought her into worship.

14:26

Again, and the same woman came toward us.

14:30

You know, we have a nursery.

14:33

This time, my sleep deprived patience disappeared.

14:37

Yes, I said, you made sure and told me last week.

14:41

She turned and walked away.

14:44

In nice shoes, I might add.

14:47

I felt terrible.

14:48

I had only been to church twice, and already had

14:52

snapped at a church lady.

14:54

I decided to go back one final time,

14:58

apologize and never return.

15:01

After worship, I saw her near the coffee

15:04

and before I could get to her, she came toward me.

15:09

She greeted my daughter, admired her curls and said,

15:14

"I have to apologize to you."

15:17

I was stunned.

15:19

I told her that I had been coming to apologize to her.

15:23

She told me that she'd been thinking about what she had said and how she had said it.

15:30

She remembered when her own daughter was little and realized how her words might have felt.

15:36

Then this vibrant, lovely woman declared in her strong French-Canadian accent,

15:43

"If someone had said to me what I said to you, I would have probably punched them in the nose."

15:50

I laughed and felt the tension flowing away like a river.

15:55

In that moment, something happened.

16:00

We saw each other.

16:03

She saw a tired young mother who did not yet

16:06

know whether the church had room for her.

16:10

I saw a woman willing to reconsider her words

16:15

and move toward me rather than away.

16:20

She told me she was glad my children and I were there.

16:25

I ended up staying at that church.

16:30

This is what is at stake in the relationships Jesus describes.

16:35

Sometimes regaining a person is simple and is difficult,

16:40

is caring enough to notice the impact we've had on them.

16:45

Sometimes regaining is being willing to say,

16:49

I did not understand before, but I'm listening now.

16:53

Or I hurt you, or simply I was wrong.

16:58

It is being willing to hear that someone experienced

17:02

our beloved community differently than we did.

17:06

And for those who have been harmed,

17:08

reconciliation does not require pretending everything is fine.

17:14

Sometimes faithfulness means bringing others

17:17

into the conversation. Sometimes it means boundaries. Sometimes it means saying clearly

17:25

that behavior which diminishes, intimidates, abuses, or excludes another child of God cannot

17:33

be covered over in the name of church harmony. Jesus says, "Whatever you bind on earth will

17:41

be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

17:47

What are we binding?

17:50

What are we loosing?

17:53

Are we binding burdens onto people that Christ would have us remove?

17:58

Binding silence onto people whose stories need to be heard?

18:02

Or are we loosening fear?

18:06

Loosening shame?

18:08

the belief that someone must earn their place among us, loosening our need to be

18:13

right so that the relationship might have room to breathe. Across the ELCIC we

18:22

are living through change and change can make communities anxious. When resources

18:28

are stretched, attendance shifts, buildings require decisions and familiar

18:34

patterns no longer work, it is easy to turn inward to become preoccupied with

18:40

survival. Martin Luther would say, "In curvatatus ensei," curved in on self. And

18:51

when survival becomes the church's primary goal, vulnerable people can

18:56

quickly become invisible. Caring takes time. Listening takes time. Accessibility

19:05

can cost money. Repairing harm is inconvenient. Making room changes the room.

19:14

But Jesus never calls the church merely to survive. Jesus calls it to love. Oh no

19:23

when anything Paul writes except to love one another. Love isn't service niceness

19:29

or avoiding difficult conversations. Love is the brave work of seeking the good of

19:35

the other. It is the telling the truth in ways that leave open the possibility of

19:40

restoration. It is protecting those who are at risk. It is refusing to sacrifice

19:47

the vulnerable simply to preserve the appearance of peace. Beloved people of

19:56

God, the church is not called to be a conflict-free community. The church is

20:02

called to be a Christ-shaped community. A conflict-free community may simply be

20:09

one where nobody dares speak. A Christ-shaped community can tell the

20:14

truth. It can repent. It can forgive. It can create healthy boundaries. It can

20:21

change. It can ask again and again, "Who is the little one in our midst? Who is the

20:29

one she? Who is paying the greatest price for the way things are now?" And then we,

20:35

as the body of Christ, can move toward them. Because that is where Jesus has

20:41

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

20:51

Maybe the promise is not only that Jesus shows up wherever Christians gather,

20:57

maybe it is also a promise about where we will recognize Him. The church is the

21:04

people gathered here right now. The Holy Spirit has called us together in this

21:09

time and these places to be the body of Christ. Not the church of our memories,

21:16

not the church we imagine we will come once everything we have everything right.

21:21

The church is right now. And Christ is among us right now. Not to bless the

21:29

status quo, but to keep drawing us towards God and towards one another. To

21:39

to call us back when we wander, to place the little one in the centre,

21:44

to loosen what binds, and to bind us instead to mercy, justice, forgiveness, and love.

21:55

God knows every one of us, our weaknesses, our failures, histories and fears,

22:01

and all the ways that we are being stretched and grown by God.

22:06

And God continues to gather us around the water, the word, and the table of grace, feeding

22:13

our hunger and nourishing us with care as we become God's loving care for others in

22:20

this world.

22:23

May our congregations become places where the vulnerable do not merely receive our charity,

22:29

but help us recognize the very shape of God's kingdom.

22:34

those Jesus calls blessed find themselves blessed among us made the

22:41

little ones know they belong and may the church in all its changing forms be ever

22:50

more fully the community Christ calls us to be thanks be to God

Amen