



THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Light of the Valley Lutheran Church

A True Brother's Keeper

Matthew 18:15-20 (NIV84)

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ¹⁸ "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

Today's Gospel reading is pretty straight forward, answering Cain's age old question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The answer is "Yes," and Jesus tells us "Here's how you keep your brother when it comes to sin and forgiveness."

Step #1 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you." (verse 15) When a fellow believer, a brother or sister in Christ, sins, you have an obligation to God and to that person to point it out privately. The "sins against you" portion of this passage does not limit this correction only to sins done against you personally, but any sin that harms this person's relationship with the body of believers – basically, any sin that they don't seem to notice. The resolution expected in following this first step? "If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." (verse 15) Many times, people sin out of ignorance. All they need is for one other fellow Christian to point out their sin, and the Holy Spirit works repentance in their lives. The process is done. The person repents of their sin. Forgiveness is pronounced and is theirs. No more steps needed.

"But if he will not listen," then you have Step #2. "Take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'" (verse 16) Again, don't take this passage too narrowly meaning that only people who witnessed the sin may go along on step #2. Instead, this is more about two or three people coming with to establish the fact that this person has really sinned, has not repented, and we are trying to lead him back to God's forgiveness. So, this may be the pastor with an elder or two coming to someone's house after they have not heeded the warning of the pastor. This might be you going to a fellow church member's house with your pastor and another church member.

Yet, the erring brother may not want to give any ground that would either change their lifestyle or admit that they were wrong. So, on to Step #3: "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. (verse 17) Now the whole congregation gets involved. This is yet another volley of loving correction. It's brought up in a voters' meeting or something like that. As a whole unit we try yet again to have this person see the error of their ways and how their unrepentant sin is hurting their relationship with God and lead them to repentance.

"And if he refuses to listen even to the church," (step #4) "treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." (verse 17) Now has come the point where the person is treated as an unbeliever because they have refused to listen to God's Word and refused to repent of their sin. This final step is not done to smite them or rub it in their faces that they aren't good enough to belong to our church. No, this is the last ditch effort done out of love by the congregation so that the erring brother or sister may see that by holding on to their sin, they have placed themselves outside of the one body of believers, outside of the Church. They would rather hold on to this sin than hold on to Christ. Their actions have spoken for their faith, and it looks flat-lined. In this way, we can no longer treat them as a fellow Christian. We will still want to reach out to them, still share God's law with them to impress upon them the seriousness of their sin, but at the end of the day we cannot bully anyone into repenting of their sins and make their relationship right with God. We have bound them to their sins only because that is what the person has already done to themselves.

This seems like such a heavy responsibility, and truly it is. Why are we supposed to do this? Shouldn't we leave the judging up to Jesus? I mean, he's the one who reads hearts. Who am I to bind a person's conscience and tell them that they are not forgiven of their sins?

The setup for this teaching already came in our Gospel reading from two weeks ago. Jesus said that upon the God-revealed confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, he would build his church. Part of that building would be done as he gave his disciples the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The power and action of the keys is "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (verse 18)

This binding and loosing, think about these words describing the actions you can take on shackles of a prisoner. When you bind them, you are locking them up, securing them in captivity so that they cannot escape what they have done. When you loosen those chains, you are freeing them. They are no longer held by the claims of the law, but are free to go, free to live. As Christians, we bind people with God's law,

convict them of their sin before God, and then loosen that binding with the message of Jesus Christ and his freeing us from our sins, just as we realize has happened in our own lives.

Now, the loosening part, that's the good part. That's the good news. We love to tell people that their sins are fully and freely forgiven. And why should we ever not enjoy telling people that? This is the message of salvation – that Jesus Christ has completely paid for all my sins with no strings attached, no further debt to pay. That's awesome news.

What's not so awesome is to tell people, "Hey, you're sinning. You're doing something wrong, which in turn is wronging God himself. This needs to change." When do we ever like to judge people? I mean, maybe we enjoy doing so behind closed doors, when I don't have to look them in the eye, then I judge away. Can you believe what Sherry did the other day? I know, but did you hear about Max? We put others down because on some degree it makes us feel better about ourselves. We know the Scripture, "Be ye perfect," and we know that we aren't there. But if I can cut down this person and that person who look so pious and devout and good, I start to feel better about me and my short-comings.

It is so much easier to just talk about what other people do wrong than it is to actually confront them on it. We live in a society that looks down on you for telling other people that they are wrong in what they believe. We buy into it thinking we have no right to judge people, but that's not what God says. God tells us to judge one another, to use these keys of binding and loosing, but by his standard, not ours.

Even knowing that we are called to judge fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, we fear pointing out someone else's sin because of their possible reactions. What will they say to me if I tell them that they are wrong? What will they think of me and say to other people behind my back if I confront them on what is clearly a sin? They might throw it right back in my face pointing out all the things that I have done wrong, and admittedly, I'm no saint. They might become angry with me. They might shut me out of their life. They might hate me and try to get all our mutual friends to hate me too for what I've done. I don't even know what I would say or how to say it. And when is a good time to say such a thing? It would just be easier to ignore it, to hope it goes away, to commiserate with other believers that they are doing a bad thing rather than actually getting up in their face about it.

Yet, what happens if we are too afraid to confront a fellow believer about their sin? Then that person continues on in their sin, thinking that everything is a-okay, that I can refuse to listen to God; I can sin and have no worries. But Isaiah told us, "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you." (Isaiah 59:2) Whether done ignorantly or willfully, sin separates us from God, to eternal death in hell. So, when someone either doesn't realize that this is what they are doing or are deliberately casting God's commands aside as if they don't need to follow them, that's when they need to hear the seriousness of these words: Your sin separates you from God. If a brother or sister in Christ, a fellow church member, is living an unrepentant sin, they are pushing themselves away from God on to a path to hell. If you do not stand up and say something, who will? Will your pastor? Does your pastor even know? Who will confront if you are too afraid of the results?

What are the results of confronting someone with their sin? Could they shun you? Yes. Could they hate you? Yes. Could your words of warning lead them back to God? Yes. Could your confrontation lead to a right relationship with God both for you and the one who was holding to their sin? The answer is "Yes."

Remember the outcome that Jesus gave when acting as your brother's keeper, warning them of their unrepentant sin. "If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." (verse 15) What you say, as hard as it is to say it, could bring the loosening of the chains of sin into this person's life, restoring them to a right relationship with God. God can and does use you and me to gain a person back from the brink of unbelief. God calls you to be a part of that restoration process.

Even if this doesn't happen and the person refuses to listen, you know where you stand with God. He has loosened sin's shackles from your life. You are freely forgiven on earth and in heaven. This is what we are trying to pass on to others. "I tell you the truth, whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (verse 18) This whole brother's keeper process is meant to give people this wonderful news that after you confront their sins, they get forgiveness won for them on earth right now and also forever in heaven.

God has given us a mighty responsibility to administer these keys – the ministry of reconciliation. We use them humbly, realizing that we too have them used on us. Our consciences get bound by God's law, and the message of Jesus' full payment for our sins free us from our sins here on earth and forever in heaven. This is what we do in the confession and absolution in our worship. So, as forgiven servants of God, we serve as our brother's keepers with these binding and loosing keys of the kingdom of heaven knowing that God is with us as we use them to win people back to him. Amen.