

“Here Among Us”

Matthew 18:15-20

“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.
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,
if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask,
it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.
For where two or three are gathered in my name,
I am there among them.”

Here Among Us
Matthew 18:15-20
September 6, 2026
Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

I.

We have a great deal of ground to cover today and I confess to having a bit of urgency about covering it. Excited isn't quite right, more like the feeling one gets when you are carrying something too heavy. You can manage it, barely, but not for very much longer.

Our scripture passage today from Matthew finds Jesus speaking to the disciples about church life. Initially, Jesus offers some very practical counsel about managing difficulties and challenges, admonishing the listeners to be upfront about the issue, to get it out in the open. First, we endeavor to work it out, one-on-one, with frankness and discretion. Failing that, we then expand the issue to include a few other trusted souls. If this still does not address the matter, the entire believing community is to be brought to bear on the situation, with the whole church struggling, together, to find a way through the morass.

II.

Jesus seems to suggest that the church is to deal with difficult matters in a way which is distinctly *different* than the rest of the world; warning the listener to be unlike the Gentile or tax collector. Jesus then makes this *huge* leap of extrapolation, saying that whatever the church binds on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever the church looses on earth will be loosed in heaven.

This revelation of the church's power to deal with matters *within* itself, but also *beyond* itself, would appear, at first listen, to be something of a privilege conferred. However, a deeper consideration of the church's ability to bind and to loose, on earth *and* in heaven, invites a more cautionary posture, and a more intentional awareness that if only two in the church agree and ask it will be done by the Father. Jesus then concludes with the assurance that where 2 or 3 are gathered in his name, Christ himself is here among us.

III.

Today's scripture reading from Matthew chapter 18 speaks to what has been called, alternatively, the "Power of the Keys," the "Keys to the Kingdom," or the "Office of the Keys." It represents a bold promise to both the early church and to those in this day and age. The Heidelberg Catechism, included in our denomination's Book of Confessions which is Part I of the Constitution, of our denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA, is a defining document of the Reformed movement. Written in 1563 in present day Germany, it uses a question and answer format for the purpose of Christian instruction.

Question 83 asks,

"What is the office of the keys?"

Answer: *"The preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline.*

By these two means the kingdom of heaven

is opened to believers and shut against unbelievers."

Quite the power, quite the privilege and quite the responsibility, to be sure. Moreover, these keys reside in each and every congregation that comprises the Church, the body of Christ. Including the one located at 17 Park Street, in Canton, NY. And, it is an absolutely *awesome* power. One we seldom realize we possess, and one of which we rarely make full use.

IV.

Simply put, as Christians we understand ourselves to know both the *truth* of this world (that Christ is the way, the truth and the life) and, how to live *truthfully* in this world (in the way we deal honestly and forthrightly with one another based on a shared view of reality which is a function of consensus or observational truth, if not outright objectivity or intrinsic truth). In other words, the Gospel teaches us that there *is* a right and a wrong, as well as right or wrong ways of how to live and interact with each other. Thus, when we fail to see this in ourselves we must trust and rely upon the perspective of others to offer correction.

Ecclesiastically, this is know as "Christian Discipline." We begin by speaking honestly with each other, in private. If this is not effective, we bring one or two others to testify to the truth. If this still does not suffice, we are to take the matter to the community.

V.

Or, said another way, we need to *listen* to and *respect* one another. We need to see what others see in us, and in the world. We need to hear what others have discovered and verified. We need to start listening to *ourselves* in the echoes of our own hearts. This requires us to wake up from the pain that pervades and dictates our lives. To wake up to all the noise created by this world which makes impossible our own peace. To wake up to the power we have to actually *bring* the good news of healing, of understanding and of truth to the world and, especially, to ourselves through our faith and our lives together as a church. To wake up to the keys to the kingdom which this church holds in its precious hands. Time to recognize we owe no one anything except to truly love one another.

VI.

As we begin a new school year, I would remind all of us who have gathered here on the Park in Christ's name, and sure of his presence with us, of the great power we have as the church, to bind and to loose both on earth and in heaven. To more than just *proclaim* the Good News but moreover, to make that Good News *real* in people's lives. Sometimes, and I am feeling this way often these days, such power seems an awful lot like a burden we can just barely manage to bear. Yet, bear it we shall. With frankness, face-to-face, in our individual relationships; together, with discretion, as a few trusted souls; and, working as a congregation with the intentional awareness derived from the faith and hope we have of Christ's presence here among us. Amen.