

“Jesus Among Us”  
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Matthew 18:15-20

Binding and loosing. Sounds very strange to our modern ears, doesn't it? It would have had a more familiar ring in Matthew's time. For his listeners it would have conjured up images of rabbis debating about God's law. It would have brought to mind details about what was and wasn't acceptable on the Sabbath, what could and could not be eaten, when one was or wasn't clean and for how long. There was an established tradition of learned Jewish teachers hashing out exactly what God's law required in any given circumstance. Jesus himself sights some of those interpretations when he is called to the carpet by the Pharisees for healing on the Sabbath. So, Jesus, like the good rabbi and teacher he was, is using familiar language to help his listeners hear something different in ways they might understand. He is using traditional rabbinical language in order to teach his followers how they are to handle conflict in the community when it arises. He is instructing them in how to discern what should be forbidden and what should be permitted in the community of faith, who is in and who is out. And he is telling them to handle those decisions very, very carefully because how they handle them has consequences not only on earth but in heaven. Jesus has given his followers, his church, the authority to bind and loose God's law. He is giving them the power to say, "This is essential if you, are to be faithful to God, this, on the other hand is, unnecessary."

And since the very beginnings of the church this debate over what absolutely matters and what doesn't has raged. Do gentiles need to be circumcised? Is it ok to eat the meat that has been dedicated to idols? Is speaking in tongues a true test of the gift of the Spirit? Are icons a way of pointing to God or are they a form of idolatry? Is it essential that baptism be by immersion? Is it necessary for one to state one's belief in Christ in order to receive Communion? Is it an absolute requirement that psalms are song in worship or is other music allowed? What constitutes observing the Sabbath? Are Christians allowed to drink alcohol? Who can be ordained or not? What is it that must be bound and what is it that can be loosed if we are to live faithfully, together, as the Church?

This debate is evident in the earliest writings of the New Testament and, as I am sure you are aware, continues today and it won't stop until Christ comes again. But in all of it, Jesus tells us, be careful, don't rush to judgment and condemnation, be gentle with one another. Jesus says, take great care to keep the body together because you are, literally translated, 'the brothered ones.' AND remember I am in the midst of you, the middle of you, at the center of the church and of all creation. Clearly, Jesus wants us to take this binding and loosing very, very seriously, humbly, painstakingly, knowing that all of God's law is summed up with this: Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Bind and loose carefully never forgetting the new commandment that Jesus gave his disciples on the night he before he died: love one another, as I have loved you.

These are the lenses through which we are to discern what must be bound and loosed and how is it that we are to treat one another, our sisters and brothers, when we are in

conflict with each another. Clearly, how we go about this is of the utmost importance to Jesus. How we treat one another in the church, especially when we don't agree, should be an opportunity to show the world who Christ is and the transformative power of his love. Our conflicts afford us an opportunity to be honest about the division and anger and hurt and brokenness that is present in our world and in our church and lives, not so we can wallow in it or to further schism, but so we can turn to Christ who is among us and rely on his grace rather than feigning self-sufficiency and self-righteousness. Our conflicts are an opportunity to bear witness to Jesus Christ and show the world an alternative to the violence and rancor and ridicule that is all too prevalent but we can't truly do this unless we know in the depths of our being that we are all in desperate need of Jesus Christ and the God to whom he binds us. If we don't recognize that overwhelming need, then our division and debate will never end. We, like the Pharisees, will be certain that we are right, that we unequivocally know the truth, and that we have no need of grace. But if we can admit to one another that we are scared, anxious, uncertain and desperate for mercy then there will be room in all of that for God's healing. If we can stand to go to one another and to name those things that have broken our hearts then they may be the very places through which the light of Christ's word and Spirit shines forth. It won't be easy. In fact, it will be painful and require a willingness on our part to be vulnerable and exposed, to admit mistakes and confess our sin, to seek out and keep company with those we've previously shunned, but ultimately, I believe it will bear witness to God's power and desire to reconcile and redeem even the darkest and ugliest parts of ourselves, our church and our world.

It is easy for me to dismiss those with whom I disagree. It is even easy to demonize them. It is much harder to listen and really care about why they passionately, faithfully believe that which they believe when it is the polar opposite of what I passionately, faithfully believe. But Jesus tells us to make space to do just that. I have to listen, even when it hurts to hear, I have to listen to someone whom I love dearly tell me that he thinks that the church has done more harm than good in the world. I have to listen to him tell me why he believes the church is judgmental and exclusive. I have to listen when I want to scream, "No!" and regale him with a list of all the positive things that people have done in the name of Christ, but I have to stop myself and first acknowledge the truth of not only what he is saying but the real hurt he feels as a result of it. I need to listen when a visitor to the church says to me, "I didn't understand the Apostles' Creed and I don't know what in the world it means to "raise my Ebenezer" and I feel out of place when everyone else is well-dressed and spotless. "I need to listen to her experience of alienation that comes from the very things that make worship feel like home to me and it's hard because I don't want to admit that even though we really want to be welcoming and inclusive, even though we think ourselves warm and hospitable, we're not. It is hurtful for me to hear but it is also hurtful for her to feel. I need to put aside my certainty of rightness and listen to the elder who is wounded to the core because the American flag was removed from the sanctuary. I have to make room for him to tell me about his son who is serving in Afghanistan in order to understand that the flag in the sanctuary represents something utterly different to him than it does to me. I need to confess that it hurts when some of my brothers and sisters in Christ say God condemns homosexuality because my beloved brother is gay. Honestly sharing our brokenness is hard, but I'm confident Christ will bless it and use it for the building up of his kingdom.

I hope, we will heed Jesus' instructions in these few verses from Matthew and listen carefully to one another. I hope we will not be quick to bind and loose God's law, but rather enter into honest relationships with those who agree with us and those who don't, with those who are here and sitting in our pews, but also with those who are still far off. To do this we have to be willing to be uncomfortable and maybe wrong and certainly compassionate, so that the breaches in our hearts, the cracks and holes, don't further division but instead

become the places where the light of Christ in the midst of us shines through. This will take trust, not in ourselves, but in the One who promises to be in the middle of us whenever two or three of are gathered, the one whose brokenness bought our redemption.

I have no doubt that now, as always, there will be divisions among Christians. People will get riled up about the breaking of long standing sacred rules, you aren't supposed to heal on the Sabbath, eat with sinners or touch the unclean. People will disagree about what is essential and what is expendable. Many will be confused and question what is of God and what isn't and we will all have a tendency to follow the group that is the loudest and the biggest. But in the midst of all of it Jesus will be there binding up the broken hearted and loosing the chains of the prisoners. He will cry out: All of you who are hurting and heavily burdened, come, and through all of those cracks and schisms and breaches and holes, the light of Christ will shine and bring healing, even, especially, to those people and places who have dwelled in deep darkness. We can trust the one who freed us from sin and death and bound us to God, the one who is right now in the midst of us, to do this.