

Dreghorn and Springside Parish Church, Sunday 6th September 2020

Bible reading: Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back. ¹⁶ But if he will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you, so that ‘every accusation may be upheld by the testimony of two or more witnesses,’ as the scripture says. ¹⁷ And if he will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally, if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or a tax collector.

¹⁸ “And so I tell all of you: what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.

¹⁹ “And I tell you more: whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them.”

Sermon – Something to learn from the soaps?!

It’s back. After a 3 month break its finally back. what am I talking about? EastEnders of course. EastEnders comes back to our screen tomorrow night; with all its drama, fall-outs, misunderstandings and bust-ups. But what EastEnders also has is make-ups. It’s reckoned that in the Soaps, it’s more likely that families will patch it up, neighbours get beyond their differences and lives will move on. Partly that’s to keep the story flowing, but maybe also they are offering us role models and constructive ways to deal with our own conflict. Bring things hidden out into the open, have clarity around the situation, get to the bottom of the issue, put the problem fair and square in the middle of the table and talk it through. And it also helps us learn how to express anger, hurt, frustration and confusion and see the other person’s point of view at the same time.

Jesus encouraged his followers to seek reconciliation after we’ve had a misunderstanding, disagreement or bust up. Often the church, could take a lesson from our Lord, and also from the Soaps in ways to constructively address wrongs and disagreement and model to our world a better ways to live; by acting justly, loving mercy and living humbly alongside our God and each other.

Just as some of us have missed EastEnders, so some of us have also missed church. But maybe, just maybe we’ve got on better with a bit of physical distancing? Whenever two or more are gathered ... it can be really hard to get along! I wasn’t around long enough before lockdown to get a true feel for the relationships in our congregation, but if we are like every other church I’ve ever known, then there will be differences. There will be loyalties (sometimes misplaced), there will be groups (of which some are in and some are not), there will be power games and there will be disagreements.

Basically, what I’m saying is that church isn’t perfect, because it is made up of us – and none of us are yet perfect. Even the first church, those who knew Jesus personally, were not perfect. That’s why we find here, instructions on how to get along, how to reconcile, find resolution, get back together again.

Jesus is encouraging the church to be a community who value honest dialogue and who refuse to keep silent in the face of behaviour that harms others. But sadly, many of us prefer to believe that

there isn't a problem. We can refuse to face the facts, we can swallow our anger or resentment, we let someone off with bad behaviour for the sake of being 'nice' or keeping an uneasy peace, we can paper over the cracks and carry on as if everything is normal. But papering over the cracks of someone who is a bully, dishonest or immoral just allows them to continue bad behaviour with us and others, and that's not on. Or we can try another tactic and ignore the person and pretend they don't exist. Now, that might work if the person is a stranger, but in church they rarely are strangers, and the outcome of letting things fester is usually disastrous.

This passage in Matthew's Gospel comes immediately after two examples in the same chapter that helps us understand how to relate to one another. The first is that Jesus' calls us to show concern for the "little ones," that's not just those who are young, but rather is all of those who in some way, shape or form do not hold positions of power and authority (Matthew 18:1-9). Jesus brings a child into the midst of the disciples. And says to them that it would be better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone around your neck than to place a "stumbling block" before such a one as these. Jesus focuses our attention on protecting the rights of the most vulnerable and those who do not hold power. And the second story is the parable of the lost sheep. Where he tells of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to go and find the one (Matthew 18:10-14). Again, it is the marginalised that Jesus focuses on, the one who is on the outside the community. So, our dealings with one another are not about protecting the rights of the powerful, but in looking out for the needs of the most vulnerable, who struggle to have their voice heard.

One word that comes up again and again in this short passage is the word listen. Four times in the first three verses, Jesus makes reference to listening or refusing to listen. This repetition leads us to recognise the importance of really hearing one another, to listening closely for the truth of the other. Listening to one another, even in difficult circumstances is a vital part of what it is to be a healthy church.

Listening involves engaging. It's not about throwing your arms up in the air or shooting your mouth off, telling others they're wrong and about how much you've been hurt or wronged, it's not about posting your grievance online for the whole world to see. It's about prayerfully getting together and working it out. That takes courage and there is always the risk that the other person will continue their bad behaviour. But if the other person is mature enough to listen and work things through then you will both come out stronger and having gained a brother or a sister.

But if the person is not mature and willing to listen, understand and put right then Jesus encourages us to widen the circle of listening. This is not to form a gang, but rather it is a reality check on your own perspective. It's important to ask people who won't just blindly back you up, whatever the case, but people who will be prepared to speak to you uncomfortable truths, should they need to be said, which you in turn would be wise to listen to.

And if your witnesses find that you have a legitimate grievance, but the person still does not listen then the situation is to be taken to the church. The first churches were very similar to the way we are still able to be church today. Not big meetings at all, but rather a couple of families or friends meeting together in one another's house for worship, for prayer and to remind one another of the teachings of Jesus. Teachings such as mercy, love and forgiveness.

And should reconciliation still not be found, then the church is to treat the person as if they were a pagan or a tax collector. But even then, think about pagans and tax collectors. Following the resurrection Jesus sent his followers out into the world of the pagans to grow disciples among them, (among us) and he called tax collectors to be among his own disciples. In other words, do not write

people off, keep on offering opportunities for reconciliation, leave the door open always make sure there's an easy way back to make relationships right again.

We live in an increasingly polarised world; the United States Presidential election is sadly shaping up to be a troubling display of this, with bloodshed, widening division, scheming, the spreading of disinformation, accusation and counter accusation, it is ugly. That is the way the world works, but it is not the way of the church. With Jesus teaching and God's help we can grow into mature Christians who seek peace, reconciliation and unity, we can model good relationships; through open discussion, work through our disagreements, acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God and with one another. Amen.

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