



## Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church September 7, 2014

### Matthew 18: 15-20

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From the early Middle Ages and on for a couple of hundred years the Church exercised great power in Europe, controlling people and even kings with the threat of excommunication. At one stage the Pope excommunicated all of England to teach King John a lesson! As the whole culture at that time was built around the church, being denied membership of the church was the same as being outcast from society. This was the power of the institutional church and, for those who wielded this power, they could point to passages such as the one we heard today from Matthew. The church is given the authority to bind and to loose along with the injunction to treat difficult people as ‘pagans and tax collectors.’ In other words to declare people loosed from the church. In yet another instance of power brokers interpreting scripture for their own interests, the words of Jesus are taken out of context and without support to give a convenient solution to the difficult issues of dealing with people. If this wasn’t a telling of history, it would sound like a joke: not only is this passage not about leaders and authorities – you will not no mention of apostles or elders or bishops - and power, it’s about reconciliation and healing – the point is to regain the member not excommunicate them!

What we heard and read today is part of a whole section in Matthew on being church. In story and teaching, Matthew explores what it means to be a community that prays “our Father,” and acknowledges Jesus as Lord. Yes, Matthew has extended and embellished the words of Jesus to suit his community, but it is no less the Gospel for that. Here is the good news of living in and with the forgiveness and grace of God. Firstly, we need to restore this passage to its place in the whole section. Before this teaching on reconciliation is the parable of the lost sheep and how important it is to seek and recover those who fall from the path of faith. The verse immediately before it is, “it is God’s will that not one of these little ones be lost”. Then after this passage is Peter’s question about how many times to forgive a community member who does you wrong. In that context, there is no way that this is a teaching about discipline, punishment and excommunication. The injunction to treat a person who won't change their behaviour as “a pagan and a tax collector” has to be matched to the fact that pagans and tax collectors are most of people that Jesus was associating with and preaching to; the writer of this passage was a tax collector himself! Far from being a passage that teaches excommunication, this is telling

us not to give up on anyone. The blessing in the passage is that if we can make the person hear us, then we have “regained that member”. This process that Matthew is outlining is all about protecting the privacy and integrity of the members of the community and is about reconciliation and forgiveness more than discipline.

If someone does not acknowledge their fault when you privately tell them about the hurt it has caused, and still doesn't acknowledge it in the presence of supporters and fellow members, and still doesn't repent of their fault before the whole community, then treat them as someone who has not yet heard the gospel of salvation and present them with the truth of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Treat them as one of the new conversants to the faith and restart the whole cycle of salvation to bring the person into relationship with the Father who loved enough to send the Son for our salvation. This is not about being legalistic authoritarians and writing people off; it's about being shepherds and never letting them stray from the love of God in Jesus Christ. And to reinforce that point, Matthew has assembled a number of what are separate teachings in the other Gospels because he saw them linked to the life of the community.

The gathered community has the authority to bind things and to loose them. If we act to bind people to laws and rules and tie them up in requirements and punishment, then that is the idea of heaven that we are binding. If we let loose love and reconciliation and healing then we let loose heaven!

And if the two or three who meet, to try to resolve the issue, prayerfully decide that a sin has been covered in reconciliation, and a relationship healed, then that is what God will do, for the reconciliation happened in the presence of Christ.

In any community of faith there will be conflicts, problems and sins. The ideals of the Gospel and the instructions in the Epistles about love and gentleness and patience amount to little when someone in the community makes a mistake, loses their temper or gets a wrong idea in their head. We are forgiven and given the Spirit, but we are still human. In recognising that humanity, this passage says there is no place for some to think themselves better than others and execute judgement through exclusion, either socially or literally. Neither is there a place to complain to the whole community and gossip about the faults and failings of others. Matthew sets out what has been called the Rule of Christ; first, go and talk to the person who injured you in a spirit of reconciliation and fraternal care. If that fails, take a friend and try again. If that fails, involve the community in a spirit of love and acceptance. Not an official set of regulations but a loving, caring process to bind up the wounds that can occur when frail, fallible people bump up against each other. What we have in this passage may not be the accurate, literal words of Jesus but they are a part of the Gospel that calls us to always think and act in terms of love. The love of God for all of us and the love we are called to share. The love that binds the community and constantly seeks repentance and reconciliation for wrongs done. Put

bluntly, we are never to give up on people. The parent never gives up on a child, the shepherd never gives up on a sheep, and the community never gives up on a member. That is the grace of God being lived in the community of faith, the interdependent body of Christ.