



## An Endless Loop – TouchPoint for September 2, 2020

**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.

<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

### Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“If another member of the church sins against you...”

I'm so glad Jesus gave us instructions on how to deal with 'those' people. Those sinners in our churches. You know, those people **you**... OK, I will stop with the 'you' statements and make them 'I' statements. You know, those people, those sinners, who when I'm sitting in my spot at church which by the way is 1/4 to 1/3 of the way down the center aisle on the left. And either exactly on the aisle or no more than 2 or 3 seats in. Just in case we ever get back to worshipping with me at a church, don't sit there.

You know, those people, those sinners, who when I'm sitting in my spot at church and I am listening to the pastor give her sermon and I look a couple of pews ahead and see the back of Jack's head and think, “I hope Jack is listening to her. He really needs to take this to heart.” You know – sinners like Jack.

Or the next week, when I come back to church, only this time I can't sit in my spot because some 'Christmas and Easter' Christian is sitting there because they felt the need for some reason to show up today.

And now I have to sit 3 rows closer to the front because, obviously, all the back pews are full. And while I'm sitting there and listening to the pastor preach his sermon I look around and don't see Jill, and I'm thinking, “Jill should really be here today and hear this. This would really set Jill straight. Maybe I'll get a copy of the sermon and send it to her (anonymously of course) because I don't need to get any credit for being such a caring Christian.”

You know – sinners like Jill. I'm so glad Jesus gave me a way to deal with sinners like Jack and Jill and probably that guy who was sitting in my seat as well.

This passage is 4 easy steps to dealing with those sinners. And the first 3 steps are such a nice Christian thing to do. Treat them exactly as Jesus would do. Talk to them one on one. Talk to them with a few others. Talk to them in front of the whole church.

But the 4<sup>th</sup> step is the best, isn't it? Finally, at the last, justice, retribution. We can treat them like a tax collector and gentile. We can treat them exactly like Jesus would do. Treat them exactly like Jesus would

treat a tax collector and gentile. And we know how Jesus felt about tax collectors and gentiles. **He couldn't stand...**

Oh wait, one of Jesus' disciples was a tax collector, wasn't he? Wasn't his name Matthew? The same guy who wrote this gospel. So, Matthew's telling us when we have reached the end of our rope with a fellow Christian, we should treat that person in the exact same way Jesus treated him (Matthew.) OK, let's forget the tax collector thing.

Let's get to this gentile thing. Maybe here we can finally get a resolution of judgment and punishment and...

Oh wait. Doesn't Jesus heal a gentile woman's daughter and a Roman centurion's servant? And didn't he heal a Canaanite woman as well? And isn't his birth described as a "light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel"?

So, you're telling me if I am going to treat those sinners in my church as a tax collector and a gentile in the spirit of Christ, then I need to reach out to them. Just as Jesus did. Welcome them in. Just as Jesus did. But that would be starting the process all over again. Who wants that? This passage just seems like an endless loop of reconciliation. Good Lord, when can we get to the end of that and move to punishment and retribution? Then we can finally settle it once and for all, and be done with those sinners.

This text is like a giant bunker buster bomb on my deeply held beliefs about God. When someone sins against me I want justice, and by that, I mean punishment, retribution. And preferably divine retribution. And so, I want a God who at his core is justice, punishment, retribution.

But this text seems to say God is a God of restoration, not retribution. Re-membering, not dis-membering. Mercy, not punishment. Grace, not justice.

An endless loop of restoration, mercy and grace. An endless loop of re-membering. Now there is a big part of me that really doesn't like that. So, when people like Pope Francis come along and echo this passage and say, "God's justice serves God's mercy rather than God's mercy serving God's justice" my first thought is, who does the Pope think he is, and what does he know about God? Fortunately, I don't say that thought out loud because even I realize how stupid that sounds.

Why is it that we think that the bottom line of God is retribution – evening the score – punishment as payment?

Why is it we can't see God's bottom line as mercy, grace, and forgiveness – a never ending loop of reconciliation and restoration – re-membering?

I read somewhere a long time ago, but I can't remember where, I'm sorry, but the writer said that in the early years of the church, God was seen as exercising restorative justice. That at the core of God was grace, mercy and forgiveness. And everything God did, including his judgment, his justice, was to serve the purpose of healing and wholeness. Judgment as diagnosis for Restoration and Healing, not retribution. Just as our bible passage for today illustrates and the previous Pope Francis quote points out.

But then something happened. And it happened when Christianity became the religious currency of the land. Suddenly, God's purpose was to enforce the status quo: the laws of the land. God's judgment, God's justice, became retributive, retribution. Its purpose was to punish the offenders, mete out judgment to

keep everyone in line. God's mercy and grace were good, to a point, but at some point, someone has to pay. Even if it's the Son of God on the cross. You see, we even make our theology of the cross and our theology of God subservient to the concept of retribution. Reward and punishment.

But this passage just blows that out of the water. Reconciliation, restoration is God's goal and when you and I reach the end of our rope with someone, we are to treat them like God would treat a tax collector. A tax collector who, by the way, Jesus said would enter the kingdom of heaven before us along with prostitutes. So, keep that in mind the next time you read this passage.

Reconciliation and restoration are God's goal – his endless goal – not reward and punishment. And it appears God is dying to make that happen. And you know where we have no clearer example of that? You guessed it: this meal. Do I really need to go into much detail on how “In the night in which Jesus is betrayed”, he makes reconciliation, restoration, re-remembering a priority over punishment and retribution in regards to those betrayers, deniers, and tax collector?

We literally get to see how we should treat a tax collector according to Jesus because one of the disciples was one. We literally get to see how God treats 'those' sinners in the church who sin against us, because those betrayers, deniers and tax collector at the Last Supper were the first church members ever. And they definitely sinned against Jesus.

And he not only gave them his body and blood this night, but came back after the resurrection and said, “Peace be with you.” If that isn't an endless loop of restoration, reconciliation and re-remembering, I don't know what is.

But in this meal, I don't just get to see how God treats 'those' sinners. I get to see how God treats me. Because as much as I hate to admit it. I am one of those sinners. And God just isn't going to keep me out of the loop, out of His endless loop of restoration and reconciliation.

Nope, God is never going to end this reconciliation business with 'those' sinners...

or me...

Amen.

# *Spirit in the Desert*

## **Opening Song**

### ***Be Still***

Be Still, know that I am God.

### ***Calm Me Lord***

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.

Still me Lord, keep me from harm.

Let all the tumult within me cease.

Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

## **Bible Passage**

*(A passage takes us from one place to another)*

## **Touchpoint**

*(Where God's story touches our life story)*

## ***The Lord's Prayer***

## **The Meal**

### ***Come Drink of Living Water***

Come drink of living water. Never thirst again.

## **Benediction**

### ***The Lord Bless You and Keep You***

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you. To shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you. And give you peace....