

Pentecost XV – 2023

Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵“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. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, 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. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

In the name...

The prayer of St. Chrysostom, as described in our prayer book. The ‘two or three’ principle.

Of all of the heavenly dispensations given the Church, I might be most shocked by this one – that whatever is bound on earth is bound in heaven. Of course this teaching is a priestly citation for 2,000 years—go to confession, and if assured of pardon by the priest, then rest assured—heaven itself agrees. And that is quite true for those truly observed moments. But if I might lift the hood a bit—that heaven itself would agree with anything that is first observed on earth has always felt funny. Shouldn’t earth be conforming to heaven’s dictates? How is it that things ‘bound first on earth’ should inform heaven’s response?? My underdeveloped sense of the church gets in the way, here. A lot. I assume passive reception of heaven’s declarations more often than not. It is mind-blowing that the Church militant is an active part of heaven’s mission. But then again, we pray daily: “on earth as it is in heaven.” Perhaps I should attend to the words of my prayers more often.

God has surely released the power of the Gospel to some rag-tag group of Christians so that the gift-giving of forgiveness can start transforming the world. Two here. Three over there.

By way of brief example, I had a principal years ago dealing with a difficult student situation in which a student was unfortunately dismissed. Before I had a next moment to weigh in on disentangling the mess, the principal assured the family that, “no further tuition dollars would be charged the family.” This was not our policy—particularly in cases where the school was not at fault. The policy was that the family owed only 50% of the remaining balance. But because the principal had given her word, I backed the principal and the exemption was applied. I had no interest in walking back the forgiveness offered. It was a moment in which the integrity of

the principal's word was more important than an override from the Head of School (that was a fun convo with the finance office, ha).

Can you even imagine if heaven operates the same way? And wait for it...by design? That the claims of guilt...by design...can be thrown off of the shoulders of our fellow human by means of forgiveness?? And by all of God's people? Not just the priestly types??

That the church can be involved in the throwing away of sin? That you can be active in the effects of the Gospel and its salvation in the lives of others? And what if they don't even ask for it? That you can effect something like a Stephen, "Father, forgive them—they know not what they do??" Where did he learn that?

Pressing vengeance into the life of a fellow sinner requires quite a lot of pride in view of all that I've been forgiven. So when the absolute fury of this world throws itself at you, you have heaven's power of bearing the offense, releasing the guilty, and pressing into love—because nails have already been nailed in a flesh-not-your-own. Be free, dear friends in Christ. Be free. The grudge locks heaven's doors; or it at least locks you out of participating in heaven's pardon.

It is not an exaggeration to say that a large portion of a priest's life is hearing the justified grievances of others. Unprovoked, often undeserved evils fill your world—even petty annoyances play at our patience. The number of times that I've had to say, "It's not your fault." And then two sentences later say, "I do not want this grievance to rot your own soul. Let us pray for the kind of release and forgiveness that makes YOU whole, and let's light and love fill your heart once again." As an example of where this often functions well—many of the parents with whom I work are very good at living with a forgiving spirit toward their own children. I rarely see parents treat their children with vindictive justice and bone-grinding strictures of angry, thrashing vengeance. This is a great gift to the families of earth who daily deal with broken things. What if the same compassion existed for the world, rather than the blood-letting tactics of the world? Mere cancel-culture will not save the world. Buying your enemy dinner just might.

Let's be different. There's two or three of us, here. So Jesus is in our midst.

At this altar, to quote Paul this morning, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law..." "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." Take up the armor of light that lay all about this altar. Put on the Lord Jesus right here. This is the same altar that forgave the very soldiers who pierced Him. It was Longinus himself who after pulling the spear from his side—the first to see the wine of our Lord's blood usher forth into the chalice of the Church said, "Truly this was the Son of God."

In the name...