

September 10, 2017
Pentecost 14
Bound and Loosed
Ezekiel 33:7-11; Psalm 119:33-40; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20
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Fellow Ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
Gracia y paz del Dio, Padre, Hijo e Espíritu Santo
Grace and peace to you from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”
The instructions in this text are intended as a means to mend personal relationships.

They are intended to preserve and reconcile a wayward member of a community without threatening the integrity of the community as the body of Christ. This is a difficult concept for us to imagine. Matthew’s 1st century C.E. worldview is deeply communal. Contrast that with our individualistic mind-set and lifestyle. We live in private spaces, joining communities on our own terms. We relish our time alone. The prophet Ezekiel, the Apostle Paul and the Evangelist Matthew lead us to live a different lifestyle.

God tells Ezekiel “you shall give the wicked a warning from me”. If you withhold this warning you will be held accountable. Whatever is bound and loosed on earth is bound and loosed in heaven. Paul warns the Roman Christians that the “night is far gone, the day is near. Lay aside the deeds of darkness”. He exhorts them to come to one another in humility – not in anger, but in humility and love.

Matthew then outlines a process designed to address issues that we, in the 21st century barely see as problems. 1st century Christians lived interdependently. We live in our own spaces. The sins we acknowledge, we prefer to acknowledge privately. Confession and forgiveness is largely a matter between me and God. Turn to the first page in the bulletin. Notice the invitation from the presider to the Order of Confession and Forgiveness. “let us confess our sins in the presence of God . . . AND of one another”.

This is the worldview in which Matthew is writing. AND . . . This is the kingdom of heaven in which WE live. To be Christian then and now is to be bound together in community. We pray OUR Father, not MY Father, even when we pray that prayer alone.

But what does binding and loosing mean? The scholarly consensus has been that these terms have something to do with determining the boundaries of the community, intervening in conflicts, settling matters of doctrinal dispute, and deciding who is in and who is out. These matters focus more on the consequences of binding and loosing than on the practice itself. The practice sounds like it is the responsibility of the leaders.

Identifying and authorizing leaders, determining boundaries, and settling doctrinal disputes are based on a series of prior assumptions, interests, and power relations, all intended to preserve the power and privilege of some people while maintaining the burdens that others are compelled to carry. The church is not immune to these dynamics, we have seen them in practice. In Matthew 18, Jesus does not seem interested in abstract boundaries or doctrines, or in precise lines that determine who is in and who is out. Jesus’ words here are not meant to define church hierarchy nor the authority of church leaders only. Matthew’s Jesus appears to be more concerned about “the least ones,” the vulnerable, the ones at the bottom of the power pyramid.

The point of Matthew 18 is not that the church or its leaders possess special authority or insight when dealing with disputes. Instead, whenever the church does exercise authority, it must pay scrupulous attention to the least powerful members of the community. Whatever is bound or loosed on earth is bound and loosed in heaven.

“Binding and loosing” have become the definition of power in church settings. However, binding and loosing are not just about church doctrine and practice. On a deeper level binding and loosing are practices in which we take part on a daily basis, usually unconsciously. What we bind and loose expresses our worldviews, values, and life scripts. Where we shop, the neighborhoods where we buy houses, our decisions to turn some people into friends and others into enemies, some into heroes and others into terrorists all demonstrate our inclinations to bind or to loose.

The issue is not whether the community or its leaders have power to bind and loose, the issue is about the values, worldviews, convictions, and practices that shape the community and define its leaders.

Chapter 18 is often called “Matthew’s discourse on community discipline. It describes the foundational values and practices that distinguish the community of disciples from any other. Those characteristics include: solidarity with one another as “children” (Matthew 18:1-5), avoidance of actions that cause others to “stumble” (18:6-9), care for the most vulnerable (18:6, 10, 14), restoration of those who go astray (18:12-14, 15-17), and forgiveness without limit (18:21-35). The community of disciples represents the kingdom of heaven on earth (18:18-19) and Jesus himself is present in the community (18:20).

The process outlined in today’s text is the foundation for modern practices known as “restorative justice”. These practices focus less on punishment and more on the restoration of dignity and wholeness for both the accused member and the community.¹ A stunning example of restorative justice . . . binding and loosing . . . in modern practice is the story of Elbert Tuttle.

Elbert Parr Tuttle was a young Atlanta lawyer and a National Guard officer when he was sent to Elberton, Georgia in 1931. His assignment was to organize efforts to restrain a mob and restore order after a black man had been accused of rape by a white woman. Tuttle succeeded in helping the accused escape the lynch mob that day.

However, at the subsequent trial, twelve white men produced a guilty verdict after a two-hour trial and six minutes of deliberation, based on largely contrived evidence. The man was sentenced to death. Tuttle went on to organize legal resources to appeal the case, but was ultimately defeated. The man was executed three years later. Tuttle’s experiences with this case changed his view of the world. He became a highly successful lawyer. Appointed chief justice of the Fifth Circuit Federal Court of Appeals, he had jurisdiction over southern states from Texas to Florida. Tuttle sat on the bench during the years when Civil Rights legislation first began to challenge long-standing patterns of racism. He was responsible for making sure that decisions handed down by the Supreme Court became law in practice.

Elbert Tuttle, a white man who grew up in Hawaii, bound himself to the cause of a black man wrongly accused, convicted and sentenced to die. Although he lost the struggle for that man’s life, he bound himself to the ongoing struggle to loose the shackles of racism that continue to plague our country. Tuttle is regarded by some to have been the chief jurist not only of the Fifth Circuit, but of the Civil Rights revolution of the 1950s and ’60s. This is binding and loosing at its most powerful.¹ We may not find ourselves in a position of influence like Elbert Tuttle or Ezekiel or Paul, or Matthew, but we find ourselves daily in situations where we have to choose between binding and loosing.

We remember that we are obligated to love one another. It is the greatest commandment. It is the new commandment Jesus gave us on the night he was betrayed. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. So, when you go to your neighbor with a dispute, do so in love and humility, remembering that Jesus came to earth in love and humility to reconcile ALL of creation with the Creator.

Thanks be to God!

¹<http://www.workingpreacher.org/>