

**7<sup>th</sup> September 2014**

**Reading: Romans 13: 8 – 14, Matthew 18: 15 - 20**

### **Sermon**

Kirk Session Minutes from previous centuries, always make for interesting reading, if not horrifying reading, unlike Session Minutes nowadays.

We read of people being summoned before the Kirk Session accused of immoral behaviour, of slander, of swearing, of drunkenness and so on. We also read of women being shamed because they've fallen pregnant out of wedlock. Whatever the crime, the accused is made to appear before the Session and, when found guilty, is often made to sit on the stool of repentance on the sabbath, barefooted and barelegged with a paper on their head with the crime written on it. At the Session the decision was often taken that if they were to offend again, they would be banished which I take to mean excommunicated although in one minute I read it sounded as if the person was to be chased out of the town.

That whole procedure was probably thought to be justified because of the passage we read today from Matthew's gospel which speaks of how to deal with sin within the Church.

In that passage, we read of what Jesus seems to be describing as a fully developed and organised Church, with an established system of Church discipline. According to Willie Barclay, therein lies the problem. The words we read are attributed to Jesus but while He lived here among us, there was no Church. That was a later development. That means, according to Willie Barclay, that some of the words are unlikely to have been said by Jesus although they may well be based on what He did say.

What the passage basically says is that if someone does something wrong, you should take that person aside and speak to him/her quietly, on your own. you should point out their fault between the two of you.

If that fails, you are to ask one or two others to join you for the discussion so that you have witnesses.

If that fails, the passage says you are to tell it to the Church.

If he/she fails to listen, even to the Church, the passage says that you should treat him/her like a pagan or a tax collector.

The implication in that final verse is that there is no way back. As Willie Barclay says Jesus would never have said that. In Matthew 9, where Jesus was sitting in Matthew's house having dinner with tax collectors and sinners, his disciples were questioned about why He would do that, and on hearing the question, Jesus said to them:

**It's not the healthy who need a doctor but those who are ill. Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.**

Jesus was seen to be a friend of tax collectors and sinners and as Matthew was a tax collector, it is unlikely that he would have written off his colleagues. That may mean that this verse was changed much later from what Jesus actually said to what it says now. It just doesn't fit with what Matthew reports elsewhere.

In chapter 21: 31, he reports Jesus as saying to the religious leaders of the day: **Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.**

Jesus always treated the tax collectors and sinners with sympathy and love and showed forgiveness to them, whereas our text suggests there is a limit to forgiveness. Why would Jesus put a limit on forgiveness when forgiveness was even on his lips as He died?

Willie Barclay says: "Although this passage is certainly not a correct report of what Jesus said, it is equally certain that it goes back to something He did say. Can we press behind it and come to the actual commandment of Jesus? At its widest what Jesus was saying was, 'If anyone sins against you, spare no effort to make that man admit his fault, and to get things right again between you and him.' Willie Barclay goes on to say that "Basically it means that we must never tolerate any situation in which there is a breach of personal relationships between us and another member of the Christian community."

Working from our passage, if someone wrongs us, the best thing we can do is address it and put our complaint, our hurt, into words. If we don't, it just eats away at us. It festers and can poison the whole of our being against that person. It also affects the rest of the Christian community.

As Willie Barclay says, actually voicing it, can show us sometimes just how petty the whole situation is and can allow us to deal with it. But that must all be done in love and not in an accusatory fashion. We are not here to stand in judgement over someone and nor is the person to whom we are speaking.

Willie Barclay says that writing a letter is the wrong way to go about something like that because often we convey a tone in a letter that was never meant. In addition, letters can be misread and misunderstood and that only compounds the situation.

When that process fails, it is suggested that we take things a step further. We should take one or two others along with us. Matthew was probably thinking of the verse from Deuteronomy which says: **One witness is not enough to convict anyone accused**

**of any crime or offence they may have committed. A testimony must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.**

What we need to remember here is that the purpose of the meeting is not to put the person on trial but to bring about a reconciliation unlike the process which is minuted in Kirk Session Books the length and breadth of the country. There was no evidence of a reconciliation being sought or of love being shown.

Sometimes the depth of feeling, of dislike or even of hatred, between two individuals can run so deep that those two on their own would never bring about a reconciliation. Bringing in a third party, someone who is neutral, can help both parties to see themselves as others see them. It can also change the atmosphere in which the meeting takes place because that person is not there to take sides but to facilitate a reconciliation and to bring both sides to an place in which forgiveness and love are central to all that happens.

That's not easy, especially if we want to continue bearing a grudge and punishing the other person, although to be honest, the one who hurts most is the one who bears the grudge. Jesus hung on the cross and said, **Father, forgive them because they don't know what they are doing.**

I tend to think that we all come into that category of not knowing what we're doing when we bear grudges, when we fall out, when we nit pick, because I think at that point in our lives, we've strayed away from the path along which we are called to follow Jesus. When we walk with him, close to him, we cannot but reflect something of his character, of his love and of his forgiveness. When we walk at a distance from him, we reflect only what is in our own hearts and that is not always love and forgiveness, as well we know.

The third stage in the process, if the first two stages failed, was to take it to the Church. We're coming away now from what Jesus said but if we are going to go along with the process in Matthew's gospel, it is hoped that the Church will demonstrate love and not get caught up in practice and procedure. Legalism produces further trouble and we resort to that, even as a Church, when we are looking for someone to be punished or when we are trying to score points and make sure that our point of view is underpinned.

Punishment will not bring someone back into the fold. Punishment will drive someone away from the love of God. Forgiveness is the only way forward. Jesus never abandoned the tax collectors and sinners. He died for them. He reached out in love to those who were regarded as beyond all hope. He never set limits on forgiveness.

There are times when we do need to bring in law enforcement to protect people and to stop certain actions but that can also be about love, about helping the perpetrator to find

another way. It should never be about writing people off. All we do should be about bringing about reconciliation between two parties and sharing the love of God with our neighbour.

What difference would that make to the life of our congregation? We all know about past hurts and about the breakdown in relationships even within our own congregation. What stops us from building bridges to reflect the love and the forgiveness of God? Does pride get in the way? Or are we just determined that we will never forgive the person for what they did or what they said? If so, then how sad is that within our Christian community? We pray each week, **forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.**

The way our passage reads, we may think we have permission to write people off, just to decide that some are beyond redemption. Jesus, as we saw earlier, did not condemn the sinners and tax collectors. He ate with them. He became friends with them. He found no one to be hopeless.

Willie Barclay makes the point that he thinks Jesus may have been trying to make, namely that if all we try fails and we decide that the relationship is beyond hope and that the person is no better than the tax collectors, we may be right.

However, he says, Jesus would tell us that His experience was that even tax collectors had a heart you could reach and that many of them had become His best friends. He tells us not to give up for we may still win them over as Jesus did.

The passage is not telling us to abandon people but to continue showering them with love which can touch even the hardest of hearts and build relationships which can last for all eternity.