Text: Matthew 18:1-20

**Introduction**

I’d say it was a parlor game, except that it can be much more serious than that. There is a perpetual argument among Lutheran theologians over Young Luther vs. Old Luther. Young Luther gets portrayed as the dashing rebel. Who says things like “Here I stand.” Who will accept nothing less than a full throated Pauline Galatians defense of the Law free gospel, the Freedom of a Christian. Old Luther, along with adding 60 lbs, is portrayed as the man who is forced to make compromises. Having been thrown out by the pope, and bringing half of Christendom with him, the full weight of guiding the church starts to bear down. He and some of his lieutenants visit parishes and finds them in atrocious shape. If you haven’t read it, Luther’s introduction to the Small Catechism is worth a read. He starts out:

Grace, Mercy, and Peace in Jesus Christ, our Lord. The deplorable, miserable condition which I discovered lately when I, too, was a visitor, has forced and urged me to prepare this Catechism,…Mercy! Good God! what manifold misery I beheld! The common people, especially in the villages, have no knowledge whatever of Christian doctrine, and, alas! many pastors are altogether incapable and incompetent to teach so much so, that one is ashamed to speak of it. Nevertheless, all maintain that they are Christians…

And depending upon you view: either Young Luther and the gospel itself are once again lost into Legalism, or Old Luther adds some necessary wisdom to his understanding of the gospel.

And why it is often more than a parlor game is because there are always Lutheran ministers desiring their “Worms Moment” standing up to a legalistic church. Or if you want use the other lens there are always said ministers who have lost their faith in the gospel and turned into Pharisees putting unjust burdens upon their parishioners. And this Punch and Judy show usually plays out in ugly ways before the entire church. Like the publication, retraction and reinstatement of a catechism. If you don’t know what I am referring to, consider yourself blessed.

**Trouble in the World**

Of course that argument has been around ever since the man Luther himself, because there is truth contained in each side. And I should be honest, you probably heard it in that introduction, I probably lean a little to the Old Luther disposition. And I don’t think that’s because I’m a Pharisaical legalist. I think it is because I’ve read the bible and passages like all of texts today. And I don’t think that the primary problem in the church today is that we have too many Dana Carvey Church Ladies or Footloose John Lithgow preachers worried about dancing and scandals that aren’t really sins.

No, I tend to think that we have bigger problems with the fact that there are true things that we won’t say because we know they won’t be accepted. That we’d rather be nice than be good. That the goal is to keep the cruise ship cruising instead of encouraging spiritual growth and sanctification.

Now we all know there are times for an intervention and times to keep your mouth zipped. This is wisdom. And it can also be good pastoral practice. If you have a parishioner who is a degenerate gambler with sidelines in drinking and adultery. You might choose to let the gambling slide for a bit, to address the drinking and adultery. We are all limited creatures. Two steps forward, one step back is still one forward. But the great temptation is to never say anything but the blandest of platitudes. And the full blown case of this is giving the full approval of the office to things that should not be done.

**Trouble in the Text**

That’s what Ezekiel is calling out to his watchman. We have been given a Word to preach. And part of that Word is what even young Luther recognized at the first of the 95 theses. “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said ‘do penance’, willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.” If the word is never proclaimed, that doesn’t let us off. “that wicked person shall die in his iniquity.” All it does in compound the sin, because we are our brother’s keeper. Moreso for the watchman.

Now Ezekiel imagines a teaching situation. And we all know that a teaching may or may not be received. We can’t make the decisions for other people. We can give advice, encouragement, attempt to persuade, but ultimately we do not control the other. When Jesus turns to this in our gospel text, he flips things around.

The disciples want to know who is the greatest? It’s a question of power and status. And these are things that we like. And with them usually goes the assumption that we are right. Jesus calls over a child – in that world the opposite of power and status – and put the child in their midst and points at him. The correct teaching begins like the child in humility. Assuming that we don’t know and desiring to find out. Mentally I like of this like Luther’s first thesis. The life of a believer begins with repentance. I don’t know, and because I don’t know have probably committed grievous wrong. Teach me that I may know the way.

Exactly in the situations that we would be more than willing to brush it off, to try and say “I didn’t know” or “I was just following orders” or some other such excuse, those are the situation that Jesus so often turns his rhetoric up to 11. The biggest thing we don’t understand in just how serious is our situation. “whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone around his neck.” Now we usually jump to the worst of potential sins when we hear that, but it isn’t that specific. And with what Jesus says next you can imagine it simply as the blind leading the blind. “It is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes.” How many times in our lives have we done something, encouraged someone to come with us, and only later realized how bad what we did was? Just because we didn’t know, doesn’t mean the temptation didn’t come by us.

It is probably hyperbole, but it is hyperbole with a purpose. We are talking about life and death – heaven and hell. “If you eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better to enter life with one eye, than with two to be thrown into hell.” And lest we think we can sneak some things past, “I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father.”

Knowing what we are doing is serious stuff.

**Gospel in the Text/World**

But we are limited creatures. I mean I could imagine hacking off my hand and foot and eye and still being a trouble. How are we to life?

Jesus gives us three promises. “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Jesus has given to us the keys of the Kingdom, the forgiveness of sins. It is in the humility of repentance that we find life. As long as we are willing to confess our sins we have forgiveness.

To me that is really the point of Jesus’ story. It is less a specific methodology of how the church should act. There are lots of people who want to treat it as a legalistic thing. “Ah Ah Ah, you did not go get a friend before you started talking to the church. Go directly to jail, I get off on a technicality.” No, what Jesus’ story shows is the hardening of our hearts. If our brother has a complaint and somehow it is serious enough that he has gotten over being nice to press us, we should hear him. But we can harden our hearts. Likewise if multiple people or the church itself seeks to teach us. Consider the teaching seriously. We might have something to learn. We are probably not Luther at Worms. Even Luther at Worms might have had something to learn. If we harden our hearts to all of these who love us we’ve excluded ourselves.

The second promise that Jesus gives us is that whatever we ask it will be given. This can obviously we abused. I don’t think he’s inviting me and Ethan to ask for our Mercedes Benz. But the logical request after hearing Jesus would be two fold. Jesus, create in me a clean heart and renew you sprit within me. Let me know your Word. And let me not lead others into temptation. “It is not the will of my Father that one of these little ones should perish.” Let me not be the means of temptation.

The third promise is that “wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” If we have sought the forgiveness of sins in the humility of repentance. If we have sought to hear and keep the word of God. There we will find God with us.

**Conclusion**

I want you to ponder for a second the shape of the service. Whether it is the confession and absolution or the Kyrie seeking mercy we begin in repentance. We hear the word read and preached. And then we are invited to the supper. Christ is truly present where two or more are gathered in his name.

And as troubling as the law might be, it’s purpose it to show us the grace and peace of God. Do not fear the fires or even the hidden sins, because Christ has defeated them and forgiven them and gives to you his peace.