

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 6 September 2020

O God, our guide, set your path clearly before us and lead us to follow you willingly for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Romans 13:8-14: Matthew 18:15-20

Gain and loss of reconciliation in Christ

Reconciliation may take place when the two parties agreed with restoring friendly relationships. When it comes to the life of the church, reconciliation is even more crucial as the church is the embodiment of Christ – the love of God. In today’s readings, we’ll see such a case in the church context. First, we’ll explore what reconciliation in Christ is. Second, we’ll think about the process of reconciliation in the church context. Lastly, we’ll see what is our gain and loss of reconciliation in Christ through the life of the church in the world.

Reconciliation in Christ

Today’s passage in Matthew 18:15-20 sounds more like the regulations of a church committee, not like Jesus, who established very high ethical principles in the Sermon on the Mount.¹ Among those principles, he said, “Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged. For with the judgement you make, you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”²

Also, in the Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat (13:24-30; 36-43), Jesus dealt with the problem of evil among the good. He warned against trying to separate the weeds (evil) and wheat (good), saying, “No; for in gathering the weeds, you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”³

These examples show that Jesus tended to treat sinners generously. Jesus even called Matthew, a tax collector, to be his disciple—and sat at table with tax collectors and sinners.⁴ If so, what does this passage try to tell us?

First, it’s important to remember that this gospel was written late in the first century. The church was suffering persecution. In chapter 18, Matthew recalls the sayings of Jesus that emphasize the importance of Christians living together in harmony. While there is a concern for the individual, the welfare of the *ekklesia* - the church - the community of faith - is foremost. The principal of life together in the love of God sets us apart from the secular world, where people are more inclined to emphasize individual rights than our responsibilities to each other. Rather than allowing us just to walk away like people would do, Jesus calls us to explore possibilities that might lead to reconciliation. He asks us to take the initiative: “when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first, be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”⁵ Indeed, this is an entirely different approach from what people in the world would usually do. In the church, things are differently dealt with, including offenders.

The process of reconciliation in the church

Discipline is not a popular concept these days, even in the church. We resent encroachments on our freedom. We say, “Who are we to judge?” But the early church understood the deadly consequences of

¹ Matthew 5-7

² Matthew 7:1-3

³ Matthew 13:29-30

⁴ Matthew 9:9-13

⁵ Matthew 5:23-24

tolerating sin. The nature of sin is not specified here. But any sin is the outcome of the original sin caused by human greed and pride.⁶

As such, for the church, any toleration would lessen the chances that the sinner might repent. But it would also weaken the mission of the church to call others to repentance. The church was to treat the unrepentant sin of each sinner as a spiritual cancer that had the potential to destroy the whole body. When we read the passage in light of this, we can see why reconciliation had such importance in the life of the church.

In Matthew 18:15, it reads “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.”⁷ It is the most careful and least threatening approach. It protects the offender against unnecessary embarrassment, permitting correction before the offence becomes to be known to the public. If there is any hope for the offender to retain his/her dignity, this first step makes it possible.

This private intervention moves on to the next stage to take one or two other alongside with the injured party. Going together with one or two other believers to talk with the offender has a significant meaning. It not only supports the injured party, but it also gives another chance to the offender to see the impact of the offence as a whole. As Jesus says in Vv. 19-20, these two or three already function as a church as Jesus is with them.

In the final stage, the entire church is involved, and eventually, the unrepentant offender seems to be treated as a tax-collector or a Gentile. It seems the end of the relationship with the offender and the church. But it is another beginning of the mission of Jesus as he came to heal the sick and to save the sinners after all. Jesus seems to tell us like this: “Even if the stubborn sinner is like a tax-collector or a Gentile, you may still win her/him, as I have done.”

The goal of the entire process of reconciliation is to regain the offender - to help the sinner in his/her struggle against sin to win the offender back instead of driving him/her farther away. Paul says, “if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.⁸ Take care that you yourselves are not tempted.”⁹ Unless done in a spirit of gentleness (*praiotes*), the confrontation is likely to do more harm than good - to become another occasion for sin.

Gain and loss of reconciliation in Christ through the life of the church in the world

In our story time, we read a story titled ‘the Giving Tree.’ The question was that ‘What is gain for the giving tree in this story?’ The Giving Tree is just giving whatever it has while not receiving anything from the boy. Yet the Tree is never resentful of the boy’s actions. Whenever the boy is back to ask something to take, reconciliation happens between the Giving Tree and the boy. The Giving Tree never fails to reconcile with the boy and it is always happy to offer something to the boy. Despite having a sad and lonely time in between, the Tree regains the boy again. Reconciliation with the boy always transforms the sad and lonely time to become very fruitful and meaningful too. For the Giving Tree, its gain is the life of the boy in its eternal love and loss is any possible resentment and sadness in-between times. For the Tree, every giving is the supreme expression of the love for the boy. Likewise, Jesus came to make us/the world reconciled with God. As believers in Christ, the life of the church is similar to the Giving Tree. Our gain is the life of the world in Christ as a whole, and our loss is our human desire, greed and pride. May God help us to continue the work of reconciliation in Christ with the world today, tomorrow and always. Amen.

⁶ Romans 1:21 - Paul said, “for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.”

⁷ NRSV

⁸ Greek: *praiotes*—gentleness, meekness, humility

⁹ Galatians 6:1