

16th Sunday after Pentecost
September 20, 2020
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Matthew 18:15-20
The Christian Rebukes Other Christians

Dear Friends in Christ,

Several weeks ago, I was walking across the parking lot to my car after picking up a few things at a home improvement store. A woman was sitting in her car, three or four spaces from where I was parked. She was speaking loudly, really loudly into her phone. It sounded like her children at home were not getting along and wanted her to come home soon. I was not eavesdropping. Everyone in that part of the parking lot could have heard her clearly. Then she began to berate the children on the other end of the phone. She called them dumb and stupid and every obscene name you can imagine. She was furious with them for interrupting her day and she blamed them for all kinds of bad things. This went on and on. I felt so bad for those children. And if mom is so out of control in a public parking lot with her windows rolled down for all to hear, what would happen when she got to the privacy of her home? May the Lord protect all children in these types of situations.

Did the children need to be rebuked? Probably. But I tell this story as an example of everything not to do when practicing what Jesus calls us to do today. Jesus tells us that the Christian Rebukes Other Christians. This is not a mere suggestion by Christ. This is not optional. Christians will rebuke other Christians. But it must not be out of anger or hatred as the woman in the parking lot was doing. Instead the Christian rebukes because we love God and his Word. We rebuke other Christians because we love other Christians. Love for God and love for others must be the motivation for rebuking someone.

Matthew 18:15–20 (NIV84)

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.¹⁸ “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”¹⁹ “Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.”²⁰ For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

We often call this process of rebuking a fellow believer, church discipline. Notice that this is within the body of believers. We do not practice church discipline on someone who is not a believer. If you have a problem with someone who is not a believer, you might talk with them about it. However, you are not going to bring along members of the church to take your side or bring the issue in front of the congregation. And you should already be treating unbelievers like pagans and tax collectors. Jesus loved the pagans and tax collectors by going to them with the good news of the salvation he came to earn for all people.

So, why would we want to go and show another believer their fault? Isn't it easier to just leave them alone and mind my own business? It would be easier, but Jesus calls us to do difficult things in our Christian life. We will rebuke other Christians because we love our Savior and we love his Word. When a fellow Christian goes astray, it might be easier to let them live their own life. Then we keep some kind of peace in the family or peace in the friendship. If I tell them that what they are doing is sinful, they might not talk to me for a long time. They might get mad at me. They might throw my sins back at me. All of this could happen.

We must ask ourselves whether we love the earthly time of peace we have with this Christian who is going astray more than we love the truth of God's Word. For example, perhaps we know a believer who has decided that it is not important to gather with other believers to hear God's Word online or in person and we say nothing to them. Aren't we, by our silence, saying that it is fine to despise the hearing of God's Word? Or perhaps we know a believer who is living as if they are married with someone to whom they are not married. If we remain silent, aren't we saying that God's plan for marriage is not important? If we truly love God's Word and believe that God's Word is the truth, we must go to a believer who is sinning and tell them the truth. The reading from Ezekiel tells us that we will be held accountable if we fail to rebuke those who are sinning against the Lord. *"When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood."* (Ezekiel 33:8)

Of course, we also keep in mind what Jesus said about removing the plank of sin in our own eye before helping a brother or sister in the faith remove a speck of sin from their eye. Our sinful nature delights in rebuking others for their sin because it makes us feel superior to them. Our sinful nature rebukes out of anger and vengeance when we are sinned against. It becomes all about us. They hurt us. They ruined our day. They ruined my life. I deserve to berate them for their sin. They brought shame upon my family and friends. They made me look bad. To our sinful nature, rebuking someone for their sin gives me power over them.

Remove that plank of pride and self interest from your eye before you talk to another believer about their sin. And be ready for them to bring up some sin you have done, maybe against them. We could deflect their rebuke of us by saying that it is not about me now or that my sin is not as serious as yours. But instead, let us humble ourselves and if they bring up a sin our ours, confess it freely. Ask for forgiveness. If we have to be perfect before confronting the sins of others, no one could do it. But we only need to be repentant in order to ask someone else to repent.

So we rebuke other believers because we love our Savior and his Word. But we will also rebuke others because we love them. Listen to the goal Jesus gives you whenever you rebuke another believer for their sin. *If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.*

The goal is to win your brother or sister in the faith back to repentance and faith. The goal is to keep that believer from hardening their heart to the Lord and from pushing Christ out of their life. We rebuke correctly only when we do so out of love for the fellow believer. Matthew makes this very clear by placing this discussion of church discipline after Jesus' parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd had one

hundred sheep and one became lost. The shepherd left the ninety-nine and searched for that one lost sheep. The parable ends with these words of Jesus: *“In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.”* (Matthew 18:14)

This is the attitude our new nature has when we see a Christian wandering away from Jesus. We are not willing that any should be lost. And so we have that conversation that might be uncomfortable because we love the person too much to lose them for all eternity. After all, our God found us when we were lost in our sin. Before we were even born, the Father sent his Son to pay for our sins so that forgiveness would be available to all sinners through faith in Christ. The Spirit came to us when we were still lost after we were born and the Spirit gave us the most wonderful gift of faith, so that we now trust in and rejoice in the Savior who found us. And our God never stops finding us to bring us forgiveness for we continue to fall into sin. He finds us with his Word and Sacrament. He finds us with a word of rebuke spoken to us by a Christian friend who loves us.

You see, it is not just at church that sinners are rebuked and our brothers and sisters are won over again. It is not just the pastor or elders who do this work of calling believers back to repentance. Every believer does this and it is done best one on one. For I am not with you in your home or work or online at school or with the team at practice. But you are. If a fellow Christian is sinning against the Lord, you have the opportunity to take them aside and tell them the truth. Be sure it is done in love for God and out of love for them.

Jesus tells us that if our gentle rebuke does not result in repentance, we are to take others along to help us testify that we are speaking the truth and then to tell it to the church and if nothing produces repentance, the church takes the step of excommunication. But every step always has the goal of winning this person back to repentance and forgiveness. Every step is done out of love for God and love for them.

If anyone has the right to yell and scream at their family for destroying his plan it would be God the Father. If anyone has the right to say that we ruined his life, it would be Jesus Christ. But our God is long suffering, slow to anger, and abounding in love and faithfulness. He does not desire the death of the wicked, but rather desires that they turn and live. Thanks be to the Lord for his forgiving heart and may he make our hearts more and more like his.

Amen.