



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**  
**Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick**  
**The 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Sermon Title: The Persistent Bond of Love**  
**Gospel Text: Matthew 18:15-20**

Sometimes I hear people worry in this time that we're at risk of becoming un-tethered. Will we cease to be community because we cannot gather and do things in the ways we love to and used to? Some churches worry that they just will unravel and not survive. I celebrate with joy in my heart that last Sunday we celebrated a baptism. Between us as pastors we're talking to several more families about baptism. Yes, things are not as they have been in some ways, but we as a community are discovering ways to be bound together as today new folks are binding themselves here to grow with us in faith and hope and hopefully love towards one another.

Idris Shah tells the story of a stranger stopping at the city gates asking, "Will you tell me...what it is like here? I have to move to a city and I'm worried." The other person replies, "Tell me about the place you came from."

"Oh, it was a wonderful place! Neighbors were kind to one another, we looked out for the children, people shared and were generous and happy!"  
"Ah! "You will love (it here!) Don't worry at all, and welcome!"

Later, another stranger stops, asking, "Will you tell me.. what is it like here?" The other person replies, "Tell me about the place you came from."  
"Oh, it was a terrible place! Thieving and fornication and children noisy and running wild. People are selfish and distrustful."

"Ah! You will dislike it here. You'd better move on to another city!"

The same can be said of communities of faith.

In this pandemic time- we have been all too close to some people and too far from others. We have been experiencing tensions, misunderstandings, individual subjective points of view, struggles and differences of opinion. At times we have felt disrespected and we have disrespected. We have lamented rebelliousness towards authority, and we have been rebellious. We have groaned about the selfishness of others, and we have been selfish. We listened to others' self-justification, and we have manufactured self-justifications. This is true in our biological families, or "kin-like connections," our life as fellow citizens, and sometimes in our life together as church.

Even before now, at some point “We have in some way had to pass through a valley of disillusionment with what we thought we knew about each other, what we as God’s people are, and not the least, what we ourselves are capable of. It can be hard to face the truth of our own condition. Unlike idealized fellowship, true fellowship is the courage and the willingness to be with one another and bear with one another in all conditions.”

If I was just a saleswoman for Grace Lutheran, I would not say on a day we are receiving new members what I am about to say: This church is great! But...you are not joining a dream church.

You are joining a real live group of people trying to follow Jesus. It will be beautiful and it will be messy. There are no illusions being sold. Arthur Katz wrote, “there is nothing more important than destroying romantic illusions and fantasies about what we think church as community is. If the idea of joining a community of believers becomes an idealization of what being a part of it will “give” us we are already in the place of deception. Enjoying and appreciating Christian community and fellowship happens best when we enter into it being honest about its failures and inconveniences, recognizing we are still growing up together.”<sup>i</sup>

That is what I love about Jesus in the gospel today. He doesn’t say, “I hear that some people are a mess, but don’t worry, not you.” Nope, he says, “if someone sins against you...”and they will. This doesn’t only happen to the “Church by the Gas Station.” Jesus is telling us that everyone will at some time be on the receiving end, and by the way, at some time be on the dishing-out end. But, being bound by the love of Christ, should change what comes next.

Maybe, let’s start with what not to do. Don’t air your grievance all over social media, email or to anyone who will listen. Don’t engage in reality TV tactics and push to have them “kicked off the island” so to speak. Don’t act like everything is fine, just fine. Don’t try to get someone else to take care of your situation. Jesus gets to the heart of it and says- you who are aggrieved, YOU take the courageous step and initiate restoring the breach privately.

If you are wincing, Jesus knows- Often disillusionment “is not just with others; it is recognizing things about yourself that you would not have otherwise been compelled to experience or to see.” Jesus knows this is the path to what God desires- not that you get to tell someone “what for”.

The reason you want them to listen to you, is to **regain that one**.

That is so counterintuitive. The goal is restoration of the fabric of community- it's a mending not a tearing. Binding not cutting loose.

If step one doesn't work, take someone with you to be witnesses to what is said. Jesus is not saying, "gang up" on them- Jesus is saying, invite other eyes and ears to be present. Because they might see or hear something you don't or help someone else see or hear what they don't. So that MAYBE- the breach will be bridged and the community restored. Love builds that bridge.

Sometimes, indeed, none of that will work. Sometimes, even a whole group of people will not be able to help someone who persists in an illusion. If they refuse to listen even to the church, to a community grounded in the love of God in Christ...Now we get to cut them loose?

No- let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. They become the object of your prayer for them to be re-bound. Jesus does not call us into power dynamics here. Jesus asks us to bear the pain of watching the unraveling of the illusions of another, knowing that we are not to falsely comfort them or intervene, interrupting the redemptive process of God. To bear the stink of it while we are alongside that suffering person. It can stink. And then to pray and proclaim to them the simple message of God's love and grace.

More than one group has been dissolved because the people could not survive the disillusionment, but Church as community can serve the purpose of putting illusions and idealism to death. Because we believe in resurrection. Resurrection means new life-always possible and even better.

Our work is to look to re-bind one another in this truth. Not to act like nothing is wrong, not to mete out discipline, but to submit ourselves to the sanctifying work of God in the environment of true fellowship- where a heart touched by God knows that it could not bear for anyone to be left loose, untethered, and not bound to Christ.

Growing up together can be messy. We will sometimes get it wrong. But friends, what we are all invited into is the best thing there is- that wherever we gather, Christ is with us. There source of our joy, and the source of our courage and willingness to be with one another and bear with one another The love that binds us.

No matter what we face, and in 2020, that's been a lot-remember we face it together living in a word that happens to be the name of this church-Grace. By grace, in faith, may we continue binding ourselves to Jesus' way and will, as Christ's church together in love.

Again this day we are welcomed into grace.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People*, ed. Eberhard Arnold. Plough Publishing House, 2016.