

Matthew 18:15-20 Dealing with sinners



We pray...

What do you see in the above picture?

It's a boat. But it's not just any boat, this is a replica of an old lifeboat.

What is a lifeboat for?

Of course, lifeboats exist because things go wrong. When a ship is sinking, if you find yourself sinking in the vast ocean, a lifeboat means life in the face of death.

A lifeboat means salvation.

Throughout church history, one of the images or metaphors use for the church is that the church is a ship. If you look at the ceiling in our church, as you see the rows of wooden planks, it's easy to see the connection of an old ship's hull.

But what kind of boat do you think the church would be?

It's not a warship, decked out with all the latest weaponry and tools for war.

It's not a luxury cruise liner, where everyone can relax and 'live it up' with everything in excess.

No, the church is much more like one of these... A lifeboat out in the open ocean.

Above all else, the church is here for people to find salvation.

We sail the seas looking for the lost, seeking out the drowning, we offer a line, a life preserver. For sinking people, those who are lost in the depths of sin, we pull them out of the ocean that they would find salvation in this lifeboat—the church.

The image I chose today was intentional, it's a replica of one of the lifeboats from the Titanic. Because if you know the story, the Titanic was declared 'unsinkable', and the lifeboats were unsightly and a waste of space... So often it's the same story with the church. And yet, we sail all the same. Even for those who declared so boldly 'I don't need anyone to save me', we continue to sail, to offer a line, and to bring God's work of salvation to the lost.

But that's not our focus today.

See, the other thing about lifeboats is that those who appreciate them the most is those who have most recently got into the boat.

The trouble is, that as time goes on, we might start to complain:

It's a bit too crowded in this boat...

It's not like it used to be...

As the waves pick up, we might feel tired of rowing.

We forget what it was like when we first entered the boat, when we found salvation when we were lost.

We can even lost sight of our purpose, of seeking and saving the lost.

And then there's our shipmates...

See, the biggest troubles with this lifeboat, so often come from the people we share it with.

This is where we are drawn today in our gospel reading.

Let me read again what Jesus said:

"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

Matthew 18:15-17

'If your brother or sister sins against you'... This is the trouble that we so often have to deal with. But isn't this great, Jesus has given us a simple formula to follow when it happens.

So someone has sinned against me.

Step one: Go to them one on one and 'point out their fault'. Well that's easy, right?

Pointing out other's faults often comes so naturally to us.

And if they don't listen, then I can bring a couple of friends along, then we can definitely make them see their fault!

And if they still don't listen, tell the church. Sure, we can announce to everyone how big of a sinner they are.

And when of course they still won't listen, then comes the part we were waiting for.

'Treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector'

We can kick them out of the boat so that we don't have to deal with them any longer.

Of course, the point of this text isn't 'how to kick someone out of the church'.

No, the point of this text is that sin will be a reality in the life of the church.

And when sin does come to light, we don't ignore it. But at the same time, we don't come against one another in judgement.

The purpose of this text is to guide us in how we give every opportunity for forgiveness and grace.

Even if it comes to it, if we get to the last step: to 'treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.'

Well let me ask you the question, how does Jesus call us to treat a pagan or a tax collector?

He calls us to seek and save them. To throw them a line. To do everything in our power to get them into the lifeboat of salvation in the church.

As is so often the case, if we want to understand something in Scripture, we just need to take a look at what came before and what follows.

Immediately before this passage, what do we hear?

"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish."

Matthew 18:12-14

'...If your brother or sister sins...'

So we find ourselves together in this lifeboat, called together for God's purposes. Not to turn against one another, but to be invited into his plan to seek and save those lost sheep.

If that's not enough, we'll hear next Sunday the text that follows. As Peter hears this call from Jesus of how to respond to brothers and sisters who sin against us, he directly asks:

"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?"

Matthew 18:21

It all comes back to the same question:

Why are you in the boat?

Brothers and sisters, today, remember why you're in the boat.

You are here, in this lifeboat of God's church, because at one time you were lost in the vast ocean of sin. You were drowning. You were sinking in the deep without hope.

But God rescued you, he redeemed you from the depths of the sea and has brought you into this boat.

Yes, at time this boat can feel a little rough around the edges.

Yes, at times the sea can rage and toss this boat about.

Yes, at times your brothers and sisters will sin against you, but just the same, you will sin against them.

And when that sin comes, remember why you are in the boat.

If God has had such incredible mercy on us, if he has rescued us from the very depths of sin, if he has lavishly poured out his love on us, so too, he will give us all we need to share that love with others. To live out the mercy, forgiveness, and grace which has first been shown to us.

And as we are drawn into this love of God which never stops seeking after the erring and the lost, we will find his law being fulfilled in us as we love as he has first loved us.

So may the peace of God, which is far beyond our human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

♪ AT 172 May we be one

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