

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Remember last Sunday that I said that it was a new stage in the relationship between the disciples and Jesus? Now if you were here last week, you heard a gospel that you might have thought was little harsh, a little tough. The week before, Peter, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, answers Jesus' question as to "who do you say I am?" by responding "you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Then last week, Jesus is telling the disciples what will happen when he gets to Jerusalem, and Peter blurts out "God forbid it..." Then Jesus says "Get behind me, Satan," to Peter, "you are a stumbling block to me, you do not have in mind divine things but the things of man." Harsh or not, Jesus speaks the truth, unfortunately the truth also applies to us in the here and now. Jesus tells us that if we would follow him we need to each pick up our cross and follow him. He is serious, the Gospel message is serious, and we should take it that way. It is a serious message concerning a serious commitment to a new way of life. Remember how I reminded you that the cross of Christ was traced on your forehead when you were baptized? You have been marked with the cross of Christ forever. Now this morning, our Gospel makes taking up your cross look a lot easier, does it not? We can do that, we can pick up our cross, but holy cow! Jesus really wants us to talk face-to-face with someone who sins against us? Does he know what he is asking? I suppose that if we are walking the way, the road with Jesus, this is where the rubber hits the road, as they say. Surely talking face-to-face with someone who has offended us is a little bit more than Jesus should reasonably expect us to do! Is there anything harder than talking face-to-face with someone who has sinned against you? Especially if it is someone you know and maybe even have a relationship with? It is so much easier for us to take our complaint to other people, to just about anyone who will listen, than it is to talk to the one we ought to be talking with. But this is exactly what Jesus is expecting us to do, to actually talk to someone who has offended us. This is pretty straightforward. Jesus is not telling a parable here, we can all interpret what he is saying, just as he intends we should. Earlier in the chapter (18) Jesus talks about what we are to be like as children of God. In fact, Jesus says we are to be like a child in our faith, trusting and unpretentious. Then he tells us we should pluck out an eye or cut off a hand or foot that causes us to sin. He talks about leaving 99 sheep and finding the lost sheep. And our Gospel today directly follows the parable of the lost sheep. Here is the thing: we are to look after each other, we are to be honest with each other. Of course it is not easy. We fail. But we fail because we are human and this is life. Gossip, innuendo, just plain nasty even vicious talking behind another person's back happens because we make poor choices. The point here is reconciliation, restoring someone to the community because frankly it is the community that is affected when we are wronged or when we wrong someone else. We are the people of God and what we do affects the whole people, not just one or two of us. We worship together. We prefer to baptize in community. We have corporate confession, that is we confess together. We join in the sharing of the peace every service. We are the people of God, Christ died for each one of us, he died for all of us. Go to the one who has committed an offense against you, if necessary get one or two others as witnesses, go to the community if needed. If nothing works we are to treat the

offender as a gentile or tax collector. The community of Jesus' time got that image better than we do. A gentile or a tax collector was unclean, they were outsiders, there was to be no contact at all with them. Oh, but not too long ago we heard how Jesus treated the Canaanite woman, a pagan, a gentile, and outsider, and although Jesus addressed her in words we might consider harsh, remember her response "Yes, Lord but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." And here we are in the book of Matthew. Was not Matthew a tax collector? Did not Jesus eat with tax collectors, among others? Things seem to have just gotten a little more complex. This Gospel seemed pretty cut and dried, but now that I think about it, Jesus by his actions seems to be saying that maybe we should not put limits on our attempts at reconciliation, maybe doors should really be left open at least a little bit, maybe we should be forgiving even as we want to be forgiven. Maybe we have no business imposing limits on what we do as followers of Christ and on our witness as his followers. Repentance, being found, forgiveness, our witness, picking up our cross, the one each of us have, well it is not easy. But we know it was not easy for Christ either. He suffered and died for us. And he assures us, he reassures us, where two or three are gathered in his name, he is among them. AMEN Pastor