

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend Courtney Veazey  
Sunday, August 27, 2023

---

A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew.

“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

‘Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”’

Holy wisdom, holy word.

**Thanks be to God.**

We experience faults that frustrate us every day.

A friend cancels on us at the last minute.

Someone cuts us off in traffic.

A co-worker receives the promotion we desperately wanted.

While the frustration we feel in these moments of conflict are valid, these situations are not the context into which Jesus speaks this morning.

Jesus speaks to a deeper wounding that occurs within the Church – that occurs within the body of Christians scattered throughout the earth.

Our Scripture this morning is one of only two times throughout the entirety of the four Gospels in which Jesus speaks about the ἐκκλησία – the Church – the assembled people who form Christ’s body.

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend Courtney Veazey  
Sunday, August 27, 2023

---

And in both instances Jesus speaks to the ἐκκλησία's power to bind and to loose – to stop and release – God's will on earth as it is in heaven.

The frustration and conflict we experience in Church hurts a little bit more because our unity as the body of Christ contains earthly and heavenly significance.

When one of our brothers or sisters sins against us, that wounding rattles our souls and ruptures the kingdom of heaven.

“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

The wounding and rupturing that sin causes within the Church often lingers long beyond the initial interaction that caused us pain and that turned us from being siblings in Christ to being foes.

The prophet Ezekiel rightly laments, “Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?”<sup>1</sup>

How then can we begin the work of restoring the ruptured body of Christ?

In the three verses prior to this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus tells the disciples the parable of the lost sheep.

In this parable, a shepherd leaves the flock to go in search of the one sheep that went astray. In this parable, the shepherd pursues the one who strayed – the one who ruptured – the unity of the flock and rejoices when this one reenters the fold.

This movement of restoration of the one who went astray is a countercultural one.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel 33:10

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend Courtney Veazey  
Sunday, August 27, 2023

---

Instead of offering forbearance and patience with the ones who go astray in our lives, we shame and ostracize.

Instead of engaging in direct and vulnerable communication about the sins we encounter, we shut down and shut out.

Instead of rejoicing in the return of those who stray, we desperately hold onto our personal grudges and vendettas.

We have gone astray in how we practice forgiveness.

How then can we begin again and live?

How do we pursue the ones who sin against us, so that we may regain them and restore them to right relationship in the body of Christ?

Four weeks ago, I rode with our own Steve Haynes to the women's prison in Henning, TN to meet with a beloved child of God as she prepares for her upcoming release after being incarcerated for 17 years.

This trip was my third such visit, and as I walk alongside Brooke in this next step of her journey, I am learning about the inordinate number of difficulties facing those moving from captivity to liberty, from imprisonment to release.

And of all those difficulties to navigate, perhaps forgiveness weighs the heaviest.

With tears in her eyes, Brooke looked directly at me and said, "I've served my time. I've done everything right while being in here. When will society ever forgive me?"

Her question continues to haunt me.

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend Courtney Veazey  
Sunday, August 27, 2023

---

For it is a question that all of us ask at some point in our lives. Not only are we the wounded, but we are also the wounders in need of forgiveness.

A theological article I read this week used today's Scripture to explore how practicing and embodying forgiveness enables us to participate in God's forgiving nature – and through that participation – we are transformed.<sup>2</sup>

Through our participation in the life of God, we become peacemakers, reconcilers, and forgivers whose actions “bring about peaceful relations between both friend and foe.”<sup>3</sup>

This practice of participating in God's forgiving nature is not easy as it demands that we acknowledge the painful truth of sin – the painful truth that we forget our identity as God's good creation, and in our forgetfulness, turn away from God's kingdom.

According to the author of Matthew, it is the responsibility of the wounded to acknowledge sin's painful effect in our lives. It is the responsibility of the wounded to directly communicate their hurt to the one who sinned against us.

“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.”

Go and point out the fault, so that our fellow member of the body of Christ may turn from their ways and live.

Go and point out the fault, so our sibling in Christ may be regained and won over to the kingdom of God.

---

<sup>2</sup> Kangil Kim, “A Theology of Forgiveness: Theosis in Matthew 18:15-35,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation*

<sup>3</sup> Kangil, Kim, p. 46.

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend Courtney Veazey  
Sunday, August 27, 2023

---

Go and point out the fault – not to shame nor to seek revenge – but to restore to right relationship. To remind them that their sin is not what defines them. To remind them of who they are in Christ and to invite them to turn back to the body to which they ultimately belong.

Go and point out the fault – to offer them the forgiveness that Christ offers us.

It is important to recognize that this work of restoration to the body of Christ is *not* the sole responsibility of the wounded. Responsibility for this restoration also equally belongs to the one who sinned.

The word listen appears four times in three verses.

In the first mention of the work of listening, Jesus says, “If you are listened to, you have regained that one...”

When we sin against the body of Christ, and someone comes to us and points out our fault, it is our responsibility to listen.

When someone humbly comes to us with their woundedness, it is our responsibility to listen, to heed the truth of sin’s pain, and to repent – to turn back, to turn back, to our identity as God’s good and beloved child.

As the sinned against, it is our responsibility to invite our foe back into the fold of Christ.

As the sinner, it is our responsibility to listen, repent, and return.

When either of us fails in our responsibility for restoration, we miss our opportunity to begin again with our foes.

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend Courtney Veazey  
Sunday, August 27, 2023

---

In the last three mentions of the work of listening, Jesus speaks to our missed opportunities and offers next steps.

“If you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you...”

“If that person refuses to listen...tell it to the church...”

“If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector.”

Christ calls us to continue inviting our foes back into the fold. Someone not listening to us is not an excuse to exclude them from the Church and from the forgiveness of our triune God.

And here’s what I know. Sometimes – people will never listen to our continual invitations to restoration. Sometimes – we will never be able to bring people back into the fold because they choose not to listen to us.

So, Jesus tells us to treat them as a gentile and a tax collector. Too often, this verse has been shamefully used to ex-communicate people from the body of Christ. I disagree with this interpretation because I know how my Savior treats gentiles and tax collectors. Jesus proclaims justice to the gentiles and offers them hope. Jesus eats dinner with tax collectors and sinners and summons them to be disciples.

No matter the choices people make, our Shepherd’s ultimate goal of bodily restoration remains.

With this ultimate goal of restoration before us – how often do we practice forgiveness? How many times do we need to invite and listen and repent?

Do we forgive as many as seven times, Peter asks?

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend Courtney Veazey  
Sunday, August 27, 2023

---

Peter's offering is quite generous considering that per rabbinic sources "one is only required to seek forgiveness three times."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus responds, "Not seven times...seventy-seven times..."

The work of forgiveness challenges us as it goes abundantly beyond what we perceive to be generous. The work of forgiveness is not a one-and-done release – it is an ongoing practice.

When that same grudge visits our dreams –

when memories of harsh conversations break our hearts –

when wounds continue to fester after years slip by in the river of time –

we begin again.

We begin again by embodying our responsibility to communicate the fault we experienced and to invite the one who went astray back into the fold. We begin again by hoping that the other person will embody the responsibility of listening and turning back. And we begin again by trusting that when two of us gather to practice forgiveness that Christ is among us and God in heaven will do anything we ask.

May we begin again – loosing and releasing Christ's forgiveness – and set a heavenly model for the liberation of our foes here on earth. And may we – like our Shepherd – rejoice in our finding of those gone astray.

---

<sup>4</sup> *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, p. 45, footnote for Matthew 18:21-22