

Sermon for 10 September 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Exodus 12:1-14; Psalter: Psalm 149 (*Insert: Leader and **people***); Romans 13:8-14;
Matthew 18:15-20

“Take the Bible seriously but not literally.”

Them’s fightin’ words to a whole bunch of Christians, and we’re in a heap of trouble because of it.

I’m talking about the last part of the reading from the Gospel According to St. Matthew that we have among our readings today.

I’m talking about the part where it says, if somebody says something that upsets you in the fellowship, don’t just button up and say, “Poor me.” Go to the person and express your concern.

Try to work it out. Don’t let it fester. It wrongs the fellowship. And, of course, that means if someone comes to me and says, “I need to work something out,” listen, and try to make amends.

If that doesn’t straighten the matter out, get two or three other believers together with the two of you, and see if the bunch of you can’t come to terms amicably.

But, humans being human, we know that doesn’t always end up well ... so then, go to the whole church and make it a big thing, praying and giving time for everyone to say what’s useful and constructive.

But then, if all that doesn’t solve the matter, let the one who got to you in the first place “be to you as a tax collector and sinner.”

We know Matthew was a Jew preaching, writing, to Jewish Christians; and we also know I’m talking “know” in the sense of centuries of study and the best evidence we can come up with ... not literal scientific, test-tube proof, but wisdom in the historical sense ...we know Jewish Christians argued strongly in the early church for Jewish ways, such as circumcision ... so we can see the early church sweating its way out in this passage, and deal with it, as I said, seriously, but not literally.

Specifically, whatever the writer of this Gospel, or the sum of the texts of this text that are known, ends up being interpreted to say, WE know that one of the disciples was a tax collector. We know Zaccheus was a tax collector ... and what did Jesus say about him? (*Wait for an answer here*). In other words, Jesus ate with tax collectors and other sinners ... people who were called sinners openly ... (*wait for more examples here*). He died as a sinner, as far as the Scribes and Pharisees voted and thought ... and as far as the Roman officials thought, he was outside the

bounds of trustworthiness enough that they could put him to death like anyone who threatened their authority.

So it just doesn't click, for me, to take this passage literally.

And that's the word for today ... unless you want to add something. And if it comes home to you, pray over it, seek forgiveness, take some time re-training yourself... and come tell me what's on your mind, and I'll do my best to listen.

Let us pray.

Amen.