

“ALL IN THE SAME BOAT”

Matthew 18:15-20

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Many of the youth of our church are involved in the Scouting program, and I have long been a cheerleader for Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. Actually, I am more than a cheerleader! I am an Eagle Scout, and I have helped numerous youth earn their religious awards in Scouting, known as the God and Country program. I remember as if it was yesterday, when I was eleven years old and joined the Boy Scout Troop that met at my church. I remember going to summer camp, where all types of activities were offered, some of which I had never participated in before. There was the archery range, where I learned to use a bow and arrow. There was also the rifle range, where I shot a gun, something that I have never done before nor since. I remember aiming the rifle at the circle in the center of the target several yards away. I fired ten rounds, then took the target from where it was mounted and looked to see how close I'd come to the bull's eye. My eyesight wasn't much better then than it is now, so rarely did I hit the center of the target. Most of my arrows on the archery range, and most of my shots on the rifle range **missed the mark** by a significant margin.

Do you know? The Greek word that we translate as “sin” literally means “missing the mark.”(1) Just as most of us don't hit the bull's eye every time we shoot an arrow or pull the trigger, so most of us “miss the mark” from time to time in our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. I always say to parents when they talk to me about having their children baptized, that while I believe that little children are innocent and have no sin, eventually they will choose their own way rather than God's way, and that, my friends, is sin. Given enough time, given the opportunity, all of us will offend our relatives and our neighbors and our colleagues at work. All of us will turn our backs upon God; all of us will miss the mark. John Wesley said that just as a tree branch bends, so we are “bent to sinning.” It's part of our nature to consider the needs of others secondary, and look out for number one.

Recently in our new members class a woman shared that in a church of which she was aware, not a United Methodist congregation, thankfully, a woman was kicked out of her church for something she had done. No sinners were welcome in that congregation, or at least no one who had committed the sin of which she was accused. In a congregation I once served, there was someone who sang in the church choir who did something that many felt was inappropriate. One woman called me and said that as pastor, it was my job to kick him out of the choir. She cited, approvingly, a similar scenario where a minister in another church where she had belonged had done just that.

Most of us come to church wondering, “Will I fit in here?” We watch for cues as to whether or not we will be welcome. Occasionally, I will meet someone who has some hard

questions for me about the church and about church discipline. Now I appreciate those who take the faith seriously. Joining the church is no casual matter. But some people go to extremes. They seem as if they are looking for the perfect church. They want to make sure that our doctrine is pure, that the staff are all superstars, and that everyone in the congregation is totally immersed in the faith. When I was a District Superintendent, I always had pastors who wanted to be sure that they were going to be appointed to a “good church,” whatever that means. These same pastors were not able to do effective ministry in the places where they were called to serve. They were always looking for that ideal setting where their talents and abilities could be used to the fullest, where they would be fully appreciated for who they were and the gifts they had to share. At the same time, I had congregations who told me in all sincerity, that if they just had the right pastor, they would be able to grow and to do the ministry that they felt God was calling them to do in their community.

My advice is this, if you ever find the perfect church, don't join it! You'll mess it up! Because the last time I read it, the Bible said that *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* (Romans 3:23) That includes me. That includes you. Beware when someone points an accusing finger. Beware when they start administering the litmus test for purity and faithfulness. My dad has been a pastor now for nearly 65 years. How often I have heard him say, “Be careful when you point a finger at someone else. Three fingers point back at you!”

Now and then someone will remark that they don't go to church because there are so many hypocrites in the church. I am always tempted to say, “We've always got room for one more!” None of us is perfect. While I believe that all of us should be striving day by day to do better, to see Christ more clearly, follow Christ more nearly, and love Christ more dearly, as the song goes, it is also true that all of us miss the mark occasionally, whether we want to admit it or not.

This morning's Gospel lesson concerns what happens, or what should happen, when we miss the mark, when sin enters into our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. The term “church discipline” is so out of vogue in the United Methodist Church that we hardly know what it means. We have developed a “live and let live” attitude that is probably not healthy for any of us. While we cringe at those churches where persons are removed from membership by the pastor or by the church board for disciplinary reasons, we also know that sometimes there are difficulties that need to be addressed. We would be better off to face these problems rather than to ignore the elephant that sometimes lurks in the room.

Many times when we have a problem with someone, we go to a third party and express our frustrations or our disappointment. We call it “venting.” The Christian way of dealing with offenses as outlined by Matthew, involves going directly to the person with whom we have the problem. In other words, cut out the gossip, cut out the middle man, and talk honestly with the person with whom you have the problem. That's really the only way to move forward according to Jesus.

Most of the time we western Protestant Christians think of “sin” in terms of individual acts and individual frustration. When I have done something wrong, I need to ask God for forgiveness. I need to have a change of heart. I need to get right with God. All this is true. But the New Testament reminds us that there is also a corporate dimension to our sin, when we miss the mark. It is not only our relationship with God that is of concern, but also the integrity of the Christian community. That's why we are called to confess our sins to others, and to sit down

with those who have wronged us, and those whom we have wronged, and make amends.

It was a tense, very difficult meeting, growing more difficult by the minute. The committee had been dealing with the problems of an employee who had committed a theft. “This business cannot function with people who are thieves,” said one of the members of the committee. There was widespread agreement in the group. None of the employees wanted to work in an environment where people could not be trusted.

“A rule is a rule,” said the manager. “All of the employees will be watching us to see if we enforce the rule.” “We must make an example of him as a warning to everyone,” said another. “As I see it, this is a cut-and-dried case. No need for agony over this one. He admitted he stole the money. He knows it’s wrong. It’s as simple as that,” chimed a third.

At length, one of his colleagues, a rather quiet person not known for her leadership spoke up. “I think our company ought to be the sort of place where people are more important even than good rules. As you say, he has admitted his guilt. There are mitigating circumstances — his marital situation, his two children. None of that excuses this. But I don’t think he is asking to be excused. I think he is asking us to give him another chance. I would like all of our employees to know that this is the sort of company where someone can make a terrible, tragic mistake, do wrong, and yet be given a second chance.”

In that tension-filled room, the light of Christ suddenly became evident. In that light, some might say a vision of the Kingdom of God appeared. Some might say that two or three were gathered in Christ’s name, and lo, the presence of Christ was felt among them.

Now, if a secular organization can offer forgiveness to an employee, shouldn’t we in the church reach out and embrace those who have missed the mark? I dare say, that includes all of us. Those bracelets have become very popular that say: WWJD. What would Jesus do?

Some of you know Anne Lamotte’s story. She tells about her conversion in her best selling book, *Traveling Mercies*. She writes that her chaotic life was a mess. One night in a drunken stupor, after her abortion, she looked up and sitting there on his haunches like a cat, just staring at her, was Jesus. He was undeniably beside her, she wrote, just waiting to pounce. Lamotte writes that she was brought to God, not because someone condemned her, but because God came out and got her.⁽²⁾ Though she had missed the mark in so many ways, the body of Christ, the church embraced her and took her in.

If you read and listened to the words of Jesus carefully as they are recorded in Matthew and were shared as today’s Gospel lesson, you will discover that the body of Christ is designed to be a pretty amazing organization. It is different, or it is supposed to be different, from every other organization in the world. It was German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was eventually martyred by the Nazis, who wrote, “*The body of Christ takes up space.*”⁽³⁾ Bonhoeffer asserted that a doctrine or a religion needs no space for itself. Followers of a doctrine or a religion can function as disembodied spirits, as spiritual amputees. But the incarnate Christ needs ears and arms, legs and feet, and a heart. In other words, Christ needs loving people who will follow him.

Through his body, the church, through us, the members of the body, the living Christ intrudes, going where he is not necessarily wanted or expected, taking up space where people do not necessarily expect God to be. In his earthly ministry Jesus intruded into the homes of sinners. He showed up at weddings and sometimes caused a scene. He came into places of death, where people hardly knew him, and brought forth unexpected life.

Maybe that is one reason people try to keep religion theoretical and spiritual. But Christianity is not a spiritual religion, it is an incarnational religion. It believes that God has a body, that God takes up space, that God will not remain ethereal and vague, distant and detached. In his body, the church, God takes up space. God becomes a fact that must be dealt with and encouraged; a fact that must either be acknowledged and followed, or else ignored and denied.

When we “miss the mark,” as all of us from time to time inevitably do, God is ready and willing to forgive us. Jesus instructs us to extend the same forgiveness to others that Christ offers to us. That’s what it means to be Christ’s body, the church. We need to remember that we are **all in the same boat**: created by God, forgiven by Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to love and serve others in all that we do. Let us join hands and celebrate the love that God pours out upon all of us, and let us share that love with others.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to remember that we are all in the same boat. All of us need your forgiving love. Thank you for forgiving our sins. Help us, as your church, to reach out with love and forgiveness to others. Amen.

Notes:

1. Indermark, John. *The Clergy Journal*. Vol. 84. No.7, p. 48.
2. Quoted in *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 36. No. 3, p. 43.
3. *Ibid.*