In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” (Matthew 18:15, RSV)

One of the most beautiful sayings in the whole of Holy Scripture about our Lord Jesus concerns his endless love. We read of it in the Gospel according to St. John. When the evangelist is speaking of the night in which Jesus was betrayed, he introduces the story with these words:

Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. (John 13:1, RSV)

Jesus was a man of love. He preached love, he practiced love, he is love to the very core of his being—Christ Jesus is love in the flesh. Jesus went to the Cross, went to bitter and painful death, because of his great love for us, for “his own who were in the world.” Yet his teaching this morning about brotherly and sisterly correction in the church has some hard edges to it. So let us look at this passage given to us today, and find the love that Jesus Christ is showing, the love that he calls us to, even in the midst of these hard edges.

Jesus gives a three step plan for seeking reconciliation in the Church. The first step is where our passage begins. Jesus says,

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” (Matthew 18:15, RSV)

This first step seeks to preserve the reputation of your brother or sister. It is not hard to see the impetus of love in this instruction. Jesus does not want there to be sin keeping two of his sheep from fellowshipping in freedom. But the solution to this is not to proclaim someone else’s sin from the steeple of the Church, letting the world know that someone is in the wrong. Neither is the solution to pretend as if nothing had happened, as if sin were insignificant. To overlook sin would be to deny that the Church is a fellowship of truth, as well as a fellowship of love. If truth and love do not exist together inseparably, then both truth and love will be misunderstood. Jesus’ instruction here is borne along by the same love that is on display in the Eighth Commandment. Martin Luther, in his Small Catechism, explains the commandment this way:

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”
What does this mean?, Luther asks.
He answers: We should fear and love God, and so we do not tell lies about our neighbors, nor betray, slander, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret charitably all that they do [or interpret everything they do in the best possible light].

This commandment seeks to preserve something precious to each of us: our reputation, our good name. It seeks to let us walk among others with our head up. And so Jesus teaches us that if our brother or sister has sinned against us, we should try to keep that quiet. It is an act of love toward the one who has hurt us. We try to sort things out with our brother or sister in a quiet and private way. No one ever need know about the sin except for the one who sinned and the one sinned against. If reconciliation can be reached, then both get to go forward with their good names intact, holding their heads up as solid members of the church. Both continue in the ongoing life and ministry of the church, sitting under the same Word preached, and drinking from the same cup of salvation. It is love that sweeps this first step along; it is Jesus’ desire that the church be a fellowship of love that is the driving impetus behind this.

But what if reconciliation is not achieved? What if mutual love and understanding and humility are not accomplished? Jesus then gives instructions for the next step, he says:

“But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” (Matthew 18:16, RSV)

What was perhaps implicit in the first step is now made more explicit. That is, Jesus is not only concerned about the one who was sinned against. Jesus is concerned about both persons in this situation: the one who has committed the sin and the one who was sinned against. The two other witnesses serve as signs, signs that the Lord desires fairness and wisdom to prevail. The one or two witnesses are not there to intimidate the one who sinned into coerced confession or repentance, as if that were even possible. Rather, the other witness or witnesses are included so that “every word may be confirmed” as truthful and good, “every word” by the one who was sinned against, as well as “every word” by the one who sinned. But there is also another level at which the additional witnesses function as signs. These witnesses show that there is more at stake than mere reconciliation between two parties. These witnesses show that this disunity, this discord, affects the entire church. And because this is the case, because any sin that divides two of God’s children has bearing on the whole church, Jesus gives a final instruction toward reconciliation:

“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.” (Matthew 18:17, RSV)

The last step is to bring it out into the Church, to tell the Church of the sin and the unrepentance. It is not that Jesus is no longer concerned about a brother or sister keeping a good name, keeping a good reputation. But there is something more important than simply keeping a good name or reputation. That is, in the end, reconciliation is more important than a good name. But, in the Church, we must remember that our good name is not actually dependant upon being entirely free from sin. Before our liturgy, every week, we confess this to be true. Together, all of us, to God and in the presence of one another, we confess that we are still sinners, that we are not yet entirely free from sin, and that we are incapable of
freeing ourselves from this sin. So, in a certain sense, the Church has already given us a language and a rite for keeping our good name, our reputation. But this rite, the service of confession and absolution, also defines our reputation and name. The reputation that we are given in the liturgy of the Church is not that of a sinless person, nor that of an innocent person. The reputation we are given, is that of someone who is forgiven. Someone who is loved and included in a communion and fellowship of love, not on account of our own great acts of courage and kindness, but because someone else has been courageous and kind on our behalf, that is, of course, Jesus Christ.

King David, the great King of Israel, is called a “man after God’s own heart” (Acts 13:22, etc.), who could ask for a better reputation, a better name than this? But even this name does not mean that he didn’t sin. In fact, David committed some very great and egregious sins, what we ought even to call heinous sins. David committed adultery with another man’s wife, and when it was discovered that she was pregnant with his child, David killed this woman’s husband by sending him into battle by himself. But David kept his good name, his good reputation before the Lord and before Israel, because when he was confronted regarding his sin, he acknowledged his sin and he repented. Nathan the prophet comes to him and tells David of his sin and this is King David’s sole response, “I have sinned against the LORD” (2 Samuel 12:13, RSV).

When Jesus instructs us to bring the sin before the church, it is not to bring defamation of name or to destroy a person’s reputation, it is still to maintain the good reputation that has been granted us in Baptism, not merely sinner, but justified sinner. Our true reputation is not someone who is free from sin, but one who is on the way to seeing the face of Jesus. Like in the parable of the Good Samaritan, when the Samaritan takes the man who was beaten and left for dead on the side of the road, puts him in an inn and tells the innkeeper to do all that is necessary to heal the man. He is no longer one who is left for dead, this is no longer his name. Now he is one who is being healed, one who is on his way to health. By the word of the Samaritan, the one who was once left for dead is now under the promise of healing. So has Jesus taken us, left for dead in our sin, and through rebirth in Holy Baptism he has placed us in the Church, where we are given all that we need for life and salvation, where we are promised that our salvation is in Christ’s capable hands. We are not merely transported to heaven in Baptism, just as the man left for dead is not immediately brought to perfect health. We are placed in the Church, tasked with listening to and submitting to the teaching of the Church, awaiting Christ our Samaritan’s return.

Listening to the voice of our brother who confronts us in our sin, even when he comes with one or two other witnesses, this is the way that we hear Jesus’ voice, it is the way that we keep our good name as one who is baptized, and await Christ our Samaritan’s return. This is the healing that our Samaritan has prescribed for us until his return. And often enough, this healing will come to us through the voice of our brother or sister, telling us that we have sinned. But we need not be afraid of this. We need not be afraid of our name being tarnished or stained. For our name is already stained, we might even say that it has been stained with blood—but it is Christ’s blood that stains our name, so that even the righteous verdict that stands over us, the name of sinner, when stained by Christ’s blood, becomes a good thing for us. And so, when our sin is brought before us, we need not deny it. We are

---

1 For this use of the Good Samaritan, see Martin Luther, Lectures on Romans (Scholia), trans. Walter G. Tillmanns and Jacob A. O. Preus, in Lectures on Romans, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, vol. 25 in Luther’s Works, ed. Helmut Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–1985), 260.
truly free to acknowledge our sin, for Christ has taken our sins to himself and put them to
death, so that he might take us to himself and, as it were, put us to life.

I have spoken of the three steps of reconciliation that Jesus Christ gives for the
church. But the passage goes on beyond what we have so far recounted. After the first three
attempts at reconciliation have failed, Jesus goes on to say,

“If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax
collector.” (Matthew 18:17)

What had begun as an issue between two people ends in someone being separated from the
life of the church. But there is an important distinction that needs to be maintained here.
Jesus’ instructions so far have not been a three step plan looking toward excommunication.
These instructions, from the first to the last, have reconciliation as their goal. There is a
world of difference between these two understandings. Jesus’ instructions here are not three
steps toward reconciliation and a contingency plan of excommunication. Jesus gives four
steps toward reconciliation. This last step is the hard edge of reconciliation, the sharp edge
of Christ’s love, but it is love nonetheless. It is not that hell hath no fury like a church
scorned, but that Jesus Christ is not content with leaving us in our sin. Even
excommunication, the harshest and strongest stricture that the Church has, even
excommunication is a step toward reconciliation and restoration. It shows us that Jesus
Christ is not content leaving us estranged from love’s fellowship. We are commanded by
Jesus to be in the world, but not of the world. But there is also a way of being in the church,
but not of the Church. To remain in the Church, but not listening to the voice of Jesus Christ
in the Church, not listening to Jesus’ Word when it comes to us on our brother’s or sister’s
lips, this would be rejecting both Christ and the Church.

The goal of Jesus’ instructions here, and even in this last step, is to restore the person
to the Church, which is the place where life is to be found, the place where Christ is present,
giving himself.

The end of Jesus’ instructions here may seem especially harsh to us. After the three-
fold attempt at reconciliation and restoration has failed, Jesus instructs us to regard this
person “as a Gentile and a tax collector” (18:17). This, to us, may seem harsh, perhaps even
unchristian. This may seem, indeed, like the action of the Pharisees. Are we to disassociate
with sinners, refuse to see them, walk on the other side of the road as everyone did except
for the Good Samaritan? Let us not forget who the writer of this Gospel is: it is St. Matthew,
who was a tax collector, a tax collector who was called by Jesus. Jesus was accused by the
Pharisees of going to the houses of tax collectors and even eating with them. He was accused
of this, because this is precisely what Jesus did! Jesus came not to save the righteous, but to
save sinners. So Jesus telling the Church to regard a brother or a sister who rejects the
discipline of the Church as a Gentile and a tax collector is not to write them off, not to scorn
them or shun them. Rather, Jesus is calling the Church to do as Christ has done for tax
collectors, and as he tasked the Church to do at the end of this same Gospel: Jesus is telling
the Church to preach the Gospel to them once again, to seek the sheep that has gone astray,
and restore them to the communion of life and love, to restore them to the community that
has put on Christ, that has put on love, even as the Word himself put on human flesh in the
God-man Jesus Christ, to whom, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, belongs all glory and
honor, now and forever. Amen.