

BINDING AND LOOSING  
MATTHEW 18:15-20  
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2014  
ELIZABETH MANGHAM LOTT  
ST. CHARLES AVENUE BAPTIST CHURCH

This time last week I was coming in from a morning spent on the beach having sat alongside the Gulf of Mexico with Sarah Shelton, pastor of Baptist Church of the Covenant, and talking about YOU, the people of St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church. We talked about what I am learning, what I am loving, what this city offers as the Lott family home. She talked about her family and the beloved Birmingham congregation I have known for 15 years. We reflected and laughed and shared, and we got to wiggle our toes down into the white Gulf sand as we sat.

Next week it will have been a year since I stood in this pulpit to preach in view of a call to be your pastor. Since January of this year, Sarah and I and our two congregations have been in an intentional relationship to support and encourage one another. This first year focused primarily on the partnerships between the two pastors. Sarah and I email and talk on the phone regularly, and we meet quarterly to catch up in person and listen to each other. Last week on the beach I talked about these first ten months in New Orleans, what makes me hopeful and excited about the year ahead, the challenges of finances and a beautiful, historic building that has room to spare and more than a project or two waiting to be done.

It is a gift, this friendship I have with Sarah. We listen to each other and support each other not just for the sake of friendship but for the sake of God's kingdom. In our first official quarterly visit, Sarah came to New Orleans and sat in my office downstairs and said, "I want you to succeed here because the kingdom of God needs you." Our visits are not just chatting and enjoying each other. There is something we are doing that rests within God's kingdom.

When I need to hear it, she knows me well enough to say, "I hear you saying this and this repeatedly. You need to pay attention to those words." There's plenty about the two of us that is different, but there is so much in our relationship that is intuitive and familiar. There is something to this partnership that takes me by surprise because it is sacred—it's not a strategic partnership worth cultivating but a holy friendship to savor.

Bryan Stone and Claire Wolfeich studied almost 100 pastors in a project called "Sustaining Urban Pastoral Excellence," and in that study of pastors across the country

they found that one of the keys to sustaining ministries is the cultivation of holy friendships. Stone and Wolfeich describe these relationships “not as energy-draining [obligations to fulfill] but as life-giving [partnerships].”<sup>1</sup>

When you give yourself to a holy friendship, you open yourself up to being known in a way that can be terrifying, embarrassing, and life-changing. The power of being known brings with it abundant opportunities for growth as well as challenges. The better you know someone, the more you are held accountable. In this type of relationship, you are good at reading looks and expressions, listening to what is said and for what is left unsaid.

The studies of these 96 pastors highlighted the importance not just of two pastors being friends but of the need for entire “communities of friendship.” As a community, holy friendships here “form us into patterns of excellence through mutual affection and the bearing of burdens” and also offer the gift of accountability. Today’s Gospel text drops us in the middle of a conversation on disputes: how is a community to respond when there is crisis and disagreement. This text has been held as support for excommunication in some prominent, evangelical congregations in recent years. But I suggest this morning that Jesus is getting at the idea of holy friendships that carry the potential of intersecting with the kingdom of God. These are relationships so significant that God is present when two or more of the community gather in God’s name.

After a summer spent in Genesis and Exodus, we launch ourselves today to the middle of Matthew’s gospel. We’ve missed the build-up this summer through the Gospel stories and sayings of Jesus, and we jump in now at chapter 18 with talk about how people of faith are to love each other in particular in peculiar ways. Then the next six weeks will carry us through a glimpse of God’s priorities and God’s kingdom ways.

In today’s text, the consequences of handling conflicts well or poorly are connected to the realities of heaven. Verse 18 reads, “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.” Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way, “Take this most seriously: A yes on earth is yes in heaven; a no on earth is no in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this.”

What are we binding and loosing here?

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<sup>1</sup> Stone and Wolfeich, p. 31

In a community of friendship, note Stone and Wolfteich, “Holy friends are those who do not take advantage of our vulnerabilities, attempting to control or manipulate us, on the one hand, nor do they merely tell us what we want to hear, on the other hand. We are obliged and indebted to holy friends, but we also experience them as liberating us to be ourselves. They give us perspective on God’s Spirit at work in our lives and then support and encourage us to open ourselves to the Spirit. ‘Holy friends...are those who, over time, get to know us well enough that they can challenge sins we have come to love, affirm gifts we are afraid to claim, and dream dreams about how we can bear witness to God’s kingdom that we otherwise would not have dreamed.’”<sup>2</sup>

Something happens in this type of community that binds and looses things in us.

The passage before us begins with a word on direct conversation when “another member of the church sins against you.” Two words to note here: “member of the church” is a tidied up twist to include all of us studying the text. The Greek actually talks about a brother. If a brother, a sister, a person with whom you are in close community, a holy friend sins against you.... The conflict is with someone you likely know well. The second note is what kind of conflict has taken place—the brother, sister, friend “sins against you.” Some manuscripts of this Matthew passage, and its parallel in Luke 17, remove the “against you” part and focus on the wayward friend. Sin, as it is used here, is the notion of missing the mark, straying off the intended course, maybe even wandering off of the way. These are instructions to guide each other back into right relationship with God and with each other because the consequences are lasting.

It takes a lot for us to put this kind of work into our relationships here even when we agree that our actions as a people of faith have consequences beyond the walls of this space. Almost all of us in this room are Southern, and we must be honest about the way we have been culturally shaped to speak of our grief, our hurt, our disappointment, our anxiety, our anger.

When asked, “How are you?” ... “Honey, I’m fiiiine, I’m fiiiine.”

If someone gets bolder and asks, “Are you angry with me?” ... “No, darlin’. I’m fiiiine.”

And then we turn the corner to someone safe and say, “Can you believe the nerve of her asking how I am? She knows I’m angry. I don’t have to say it.”

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<sup>2</sup> Stone and Wolfteich, p. 32

There are times you and I have to unlearn some old ways before we can let better ways flourish. We have choices in how we handle our relationships with each other. Here we cultivate holy friendships that trump whatever communication our family of origin or culture around us have trained and taught.

As a people of faith, a community of friendship, a school of love, Jesus taught that what we are binding or loosing here is lasting and has the capacity to change the story around us and beyond us. My ability or inability to love and forgive you doesn't stop with our relationship. The implications ripple out from the two of us to the community of faith in this room and then the city around us and on and on to the farthest reaches of God's kingdom.

We practice our faith the way a young child practices walking. Stumbling first. Holding onto a pant leg or piece of furniture for dear life. Timidly stepping out only to fall flat on her face. Afraid to try again but not satisfied to crawl forever. We are practicing this way of walking until maybe, hopefully, we begin to walk more steadily, then we encourage others to walk with us. We don't get it right each time. We have to keep practicing.

In his new book *We Make the Road By Walking*, Brian McLaren writes, "You are not finished yet. You are 'in the making.' You have the capacity to learn, mature, think, change, and grow. You also have the freedom to stagnate, regress, constrict, and lose your way. Which road will you take?...I believe that all of us play a role in choosing and creating our futures—as individuals and as communities. We don't need to wait passively for history to happen to us. We can become protagonists in our own story. We can make the road by walking."<sup>3</sup>

What's at work here in these proposed steps of communication is not allegiance to the steps themselves. The instructions are getting at viewing community as a way, and that way is worth dedicating time and energy to making sure we understand each other and try to keep things right here. The individuals around us here are valued by God as children, and we are called to value each other in that same way. In Christian community, we must have a concern for the other—that means both the one whom we identify as our brother or sister and the one whom we cannot understand and view as completely different from us. These steps also reflect a love for the community itself. Our actions and ways of communicating can either benefit our feelings and needs in a moment or can work for the strengthening and health of the faith community. It takes

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<sup>3</sup> Brian McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking*, preface

awareness and accountability to make choices that are to the advantage of a larger body.

This is really hard to do. This kind of honest, truth telling, forgiving, challenging, disagreeing-but-loving-anyway community is hard to live out. We say we want it, but, more often than not, we aren't willing to actually do the work of being vulnerable or loving someone who is always going to disagree with us about things that matter to our hearts.

But we commit ourselves anew again today. We bind ourselves to God and to one another. We come before this common table with forgiveness and reconciliation and love on our lips. We confess we have fallen, we have wandered off of the way, and we allow this time and this community and this bread and this cup to draw us back again.