

September 10, 2023 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Psalm 119:33-40  
Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

### Telling the Truth. Hearing the Truth.

**Grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen**

**I spent 3 days at the end of August** with some of my good women friends from Divinity School. These are a few of the classmates with whom I studied at University of Chicago as I prepared to become a pastor. We've taken a variety of paths over the last 25 years. Some of us are pastors in congregational or university settings. One is a therapist in private practice. Another is an Episcopal priest with a day job teaching 9<sup>th</sup> grade English in urban Syracuse.

**We convened in western Michigan**, along the lake shore, and we talked, and laughed, and cried, and took walks, and cooked and ate good food... and talked some more... about our children (they range from 4<sup>th</sup> grade to law school), about our ministries and professional work, about our spouses, about our parents and siblings, about the world, and spirituality and practices of faith, and bodies and change, about what the future holds,

**I'd looked ahead at this Sunday reading, and, curious,**  
I brought to this group today's gospel.

**My therapist friend was all over it.**

These are Rules for Engagement, she said. We're no longer at the mercy of what is whispered behind someone's back, or what is kept silent. Following this pattern, this procedure, if you will, truths are spoken openly, first to the one with whom you're interacting, and then wider if necessary. Rules for Engagement.

**The 9<sup>th</sup> grade teacher commented** how often tensions and arguments, and even physical fights, involve not just two students with animosity, but also their friends, and lines are drawn. At their best, friends will hold back the conflicted students, help them find face-saving ways to step away, to avoid a brawl in the hallway, or worse. So quickly tensions escalate, especially for teens, but for all of us, and we bring our worst selves. This guidance from Jesus makes a space for us to slow down, to express hurt and conflict, not in a winning and losing way, but to speak our truth, our experience, to hear another's truth, to resist and stay in conversation.

**Telling the truth, hearing the truth.**

Today's Gospel is clear, flow chart clear, schematic clear.... So clear that often the constitution of a congregation or a group of congregations will literally cite these verses from Matthew 18 when talking about conflict. If someone sins—when we sin, when tension draws us apart from God and one each other—talk directly first, and if that doesn't work, bring along another, and so on. Jesus says this to the church, in Greek the ekklesia (ek lesia), literally the gathered ones.

But I believe these are words for each of us,  
and our housemates and roommates, our families,  
our communities, our world.

**Most of the time when one of you comes to my office with this type of issue,**

I'll ask, "Have you talked with them about it?"

That's nearly always the first big step.

I know, it's easy to triangulate, to want to "help" the situation by intervening,  
but maybe our best help is to encourage one another to speak together, one to one, to tell the truth.  
And it's all-too-easy to be passive aggressive, or to be conflict avoidant, I get it.  
but that rarely gets us anywhere, really.

Dearly beloved, tell the truth: **Talk with the one you are struggling with.**

**Maybe it's just me, but after all the parables we're heard recently in the gospels,**

the clarity of this reading is a welcome relief. Thank you, Jesus.

But... seeing this only as a step by step set of rules—do this, then do that—may miss the power.

I suspect it is relationships that Jesus is most concerned about,

not our ability to follow the rules, but real relationship.

Maybe Jesus hopes for us to begin with these rules of engagement (if someone sins, do this)

but then practice takes root... in relationship,

in our willingness to address pain,

in confession.

And, slowly, over time, we've become more comfortable with our need to speak honestly,

to hear the truths of another's experience,

to be a community with a culture that tells the truth,

to forgive and to be forgiven, to live with the messy realities of human life.

**In our tradition, we talk of Law and Gospel.**

Today's passages are a beautiful mix, and a healthy tension of why BOTH law and gospel are needed.

We need the law's guardrails and direction:

Our Psalm begins: Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes.

What a life giving gift the law is, the Torah is—our Jewish kin know this so well.

And then in our tradition, we need the gospel promise that Jesus' grace is real,

for us, and for our communities, for our world.

We need both law and gospel.

**Did you notice how today's reading concludes?**

"Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

How often have we used this verse when we happen to be small group in worship or a meeting?

Friends, there's more to it!

On the heels of these rules for engagement,

it reminds us that even in our conflicts (especially in our conflicts),

in our hard truths, and painful times

God is present, Jesus is right here among us.

**This morning with congregations across the ELCA, we celebrate God's Work, Our Hands:**

We're collecting food for Joyce Food Shelf in Uptown.

We're advocating for worker justice with CTUL.

We're making cards for our homebound members.

We're inviting neighboring students to next week's Welcome Back Students event.

We're hearing more about this summer's service learning time

at the mission in San Lucas Toliman Guatemala.

We're also signing up for the racial justice ACTION project.

We're walking with our immigrant neighbors.

We're coming to understand these broken systems we've inherited,  
how by listening to the truths of others,  
by speaking our own truth,  
change can come, change will come.

**At our best, we're telling the truth, and we're inviting one another to tell the truth.**

How have we been hurt or pained by someone else's sin?

And how have we caused another hurt or pain by our sin?

My friends, this is radical, it's counter-cultural, it might make us uncomfortable,  
and yet Jesus promises he is right here with us, among us.

**This, dear ones, is God's work in our hands:**

telling the truth and

listening to the truth and

making a space in love for the power of this truth to **set us free**.

Thanks be to God. Amen