

SERMON FOR SUN. SEPT. 6 AND WED. SEPT. 9, 2020

Pent 14A 2020 Matthew 18:15-20 “Restoring the Devastated”

Dear fellow redeemed of Christ, unfortunately, we’ve become all too familiar with pictures of devastation. T.V. anchors breathlessly detail the devastated caused by famine, floods, hurricanes, tornados and race-based civil unrest. And this year, we’ve witnessed families devastated by the COVID 19 pandemic.

Your heart aches when you see such stories, for many of those folks have lost everything. Who among us does not want to help?

Perhaps you’ve given to the Red Cross or LCMS relief agencies in the past. Still, given the relentless nature of a fallen nature’s rebellion, it can seem as if the needs of our neighbors are bottomless while our wallets are not.

Yet, how coldhearted would we be if we waited silently, insisting that the victims first humble themselves to ask for our help? No, if we’re able to help, we must do something to help those unfortunate souls.

And yet, when it comes to spiritual devastation, to matters of sin and forgiveness, we aren’t nearly as compassionate.

Even though the devastation caused by sin is *worse* than the pictures we see on T.V. But do our hearts ache when sin is devastating our neighbors?

Do we want to help and restore them, or are we coldhearted, not wanting to be bothered, not wanting to extend ourselves?

Our friends and neighbors and fellow church members are caught in addiction to sin, false beliefs, and ignorance, which have devastating effects on their spiritual condition.

And they need our help. They need to be restored to a life of faith in Jesus Christ.

But how often are we silent? What a terrible indictment of us if we fail to help when not just life, but ***eternal*** life is at stake!

God’s inspired word from Ezekiel, and the words of Jesus in the Holy Gospel, would have us understand that there is ***devastation*** all around us, and people in need of ***restoration***.

Jesus saw his creations fall, and He had compassion, His heart ached for us in our brokenness.

Our eyes may not be able to see *spiritual* devastation, but that doesn’t make it less real. Today Jesus teaches sin is more lethal than tornadoes or COVID, and as Christians, we are to do something about it, intervening in the lives of our neighbor.

So why don’t we? Why do we remain silent when our neighbor’s eternal life is at stake?

Perhaps it is because we underestimate the devastation caused by sin since so often it cannot be seen.

We ***see*** the consequences of natural disasters and rioting. Yet our friends and neighbors caught up in sin ***seem to be doing just fine*** without our help – maybe even better than us!

But if we believe God's Word, we know that the spiritual reality is not what we see. For often, inside lovely homes are desperately lonely people. Their fine clothes are merely covering their spiritual poverty. Their prideful boasting conceals a frightened child. And they need our help.

Or perhaps we don't seek to help our neighbor lost in a sinful lifestyle because we know that if we tell them about their sin, they may not be very receptive.

In fact, they may hate us for what they see as just another sanctimonious prig of a Christian butting into their lives.

Or perhaps we do nothing because we have been hurt.

When someone sins against you, you may be angry, and that hurt and anger prevents you from seeing that ***the same sin that has hurt you has hurt them as well.***

You see, sin doesn't only injure the one sinned against; it hurts the sinner as well. All sin is ultimately a rebellion against God. When David repented of his sin, he was inspired to tell God, "**Against, you, you only have I sinned, and no what is evil in your sight.**" Sin separates our neighbor from God, as it damages their faith. And sin left unchecked can ultimately kill faith.

Or perhaps we do nothing because the sin ***against us*** has flared up the sin ***within us***, and so we seek to repay in kind, to "***give them a dose of their own medicine.***" We want revenge.

And even if we do "graciously" agree to forgive, we want that person to come to us, to humble themselves and ask for forgiveness— then maybe, just *maybe* we'll forgive. *If* they really mean it and *If* we're satisfied with the degree of their repentance.

Do you see the devastating effects of sin! It is a downward spiral, feeding on itself, devastating everyone in its wake! **PAUSE**

And so today, Jesus says, set aside your anger, your concern for yourself, your self-righteous indignation, your fear of being rebuffed and rejected.

Repent of your own sin, forgive, and have concern for your brother's devastation. Take the first step to help bind up his wounds, and restore him.

If we do not we are not only hurting him, we are hurting ourselves. ***But that's easier said than done, isn't it?***

It is unless you think of what Jesus has done for you. For it is not just *others* who are ravaged by sin—we too have been devastated by the catastrophic damage precipitated by Satan in the Garden of Eden.

We would have been irretrievably lost in our sin, were it not for the compassion of our brother, Jesus. Jesus saw past our brave, false fronts to see that no, we're not okay!

Our brother Jesus who is hurt by our sin, but does not hurt us back.

Our brother who has every right to be angry at us for the damage we do to Him, His world and our neighbors but instead of seeking revenge, restored the breach our sin had created between God and us.

Our brother Jesus who did not wait first to be asked, but sent His prophets to speak to us His Word of warning [the Law] and His Word of restoration and forgiveness [the Gospel], and not stopping there, He personally meets us in our brokenness.

The Son of God came into our fallen world, not to condemn our sin, but to rescue us even at the cost of a cruel death.

The Sinless One became sin for us so that we sinners could be forgiven and restored.

Why? Because He saw. He saw the devastation. He saw the pain and misery. He saw the hopelessness and despair.

And in love, He had to act. And by doing so, He gained His brothers.

And Jesus didn't just restore us once or a few times, but He does so constantly. While His cross and resurrection took place at one moment in time, the blessings that flowed from his death and resurrection—restoration and forgiveness—are for all time.

Jesus gives us His water, forgiving our sins in Holy Baptism, and restoring us so that we are no longer children of sin and Satan, but children of the Most High God.

We all need food to live, and so Jesus gives us His food; His in, with and under the bread and wine we receive His very body and blood, to strengthen our faith, by which we stand in God's presence restored and forgiven for Jesus' sake.

And just as we all need hope for the future, so through His Word, Jesus restores and forgives us as He absolves us of the guilt of our sin.

And please note, God throws us *these lifelines* – not because we ask for them, not because we deserve them, not for any other reason than that in His great love He has compassion on us.

His heart goes out to us to restore us into His family, His Church. He seeks us out to grant us the life eternal He'd always planned and desired for us. **PAUSE**

In today's Gospel lesson 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."**

Notice that *it's the injured party*, the one sinned against, that is to take the initiative just as he saw our sins and took the initiative to restore us to God's family.

And so today, He sends us to do for others what He has done for us. To win back our lost brothers and sisters. Is it hard? Yes. But is it impossible? No.

It's not impossible when you realize that He doesn't ask you to do this on your own, but has already given you all you need.

We love because He first loved us. We have compassion because He first had compassion on us. We seek our lost brother because our brother Jesus first sought us.

The love and compassion and forgiveness He's already given and continues to provide for you. It is not yours to keep or withhold. It is yours to give. And in giving, to restore.

As the Spirit enables, we are to restore those who are lost, hurting, and are devastated. And in so doing, we are being like Christ. **PAUSE**

You know, so often, when we read or hear today's Gospel lesson, the temptation is to think, why not just kick those evil sinners out! Out of my life. Out of the church.

But that's not what these words are all about. They are about **gaining** your brother, loving him enough to point out the sin, and to grant forgiveness—whenever it is asked for.

A couple of weeks ago, we talked about the keys to the kingdom. Part of the exercise of those keys is when you, as part of the priesthood of all believers, seek to be reconciled with your brother or sister who've sinned against you.

Just as you require forgiveness for the sins you commit daily, so do they.

So, in the end, this passage is all about being sure, sure that my brother, my Good Shepherd, the very Son of God, who is not willing that any should be lost, is here for me as well as my brother who sinned against me.

Every member of this church is a fallen sinner, and as such, offense will be given and taken. But instead of willfully cutting each other off, Jesus demands we forgive as we've been forgiven.

Jesus said, **“Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them.**

Two or three gathered in His Name here today. We gather to confess and receive His absolution. To receive His Word and Sacrament. To go with His blessing, forgiven and restored.

We are the ones so gathered in His Name, and in His presence. In Spirit-led response, may we begin to see our neighbors through Jesus' eyes.

May we go and care for them with His compassion. Go and love with His love. May the Spirit restore your friends' devastation with the Good news that just Jesus has restored you, both you and He forgive them too. Go to them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. **AMEN**