

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ¹⁸ ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ ‘Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.’ (Matthew 18:15-20)

Jesus Works through Us

When we say that someone is building a new home, what do we mean? Do we mean that they’re actually out there on the lot, driving nails and hanging drywall? If we’re talking about a builder or a contractor, maybe. But even builders don’t do all the work by themselves. They pay people to work with them. Most of the time, when we say that someone’s building a new home, we don’t mean that they’re on site doing the work themselves. They hired an architect and borrowed money and approved the plans. It wouldn’t be going up if they didn’t do all that. But they’re working through other people. In the word of God that we have before us this morning, we see something similar. God is working. But we don’t see him down here on earth preaching and teaching and counseling. We see people doing those things. But all that Jesus commands us to do in this lesson rests on this foundation: **Jesus works through us.**

I.

In the first four verses of our gospel lesson, four times Jesus tells us to do something. If your brothers sins against you, do this. Not once in those four verses does he even mention God’s name. And the way that these verses have been put into practice in the Church sometimes may make us think God has nothing to do with this. But every word of this reading is about what God does. He chooses to work through people. But he is the one who’s working. You see that when Jesus said, **“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”** Jesus gives us real power here, the power that we Lutherans call the keys. Luther summed up what these words mean when he said, “... when this is done, it is as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us himself.” That’s true because of what the keys are: the law and the gospel. That word of God is his power.

Jesus gave us two keys: the binding key and the loosing key. The binding key is the law. It ties sin to the sinner. So when we tell someone that they are under God’s judgment because they refuse to repent and if they die without repenting, they will go to hell, the power of Christ is in those words. It strikes terror into the heart of a sinner. That doesn’t happen because we’re good speakers. It happens because God works through his word. God strikes fear into that person’s heart. Does that surprise you? God is a God of justice and he will send sinners to hell. But Isaiah calls that work of terrifying sinners God’s “alien task.” God is a God of love. His natural work is to forgive and save. But because of the hardness of our hearts, first he has to condemn. So he sends us to proclaim that justice and that eternal punishment so that he can reach into the heart of people who don’t care and break their sinful attitudes.

Then comes the other key, the loosing key, the key that releases us from our sins. That key is the gospel. Just as God works through the law to terrify and break our stubborn hearts, God works through the gospel to comfort and heal our broken hearts. God sends us to tell each other that Jesus died for us. God sends us to assure terrified sinners that hell is not going to touch them. When we speak those words, we can be sure that we are speaking what those aching sinners most need to hear, because the gospel is the very power of God. It’s his true work.

And he does that work through us. Jesus lays out for us how to use those keys when a fellow believer thinks they have a right to sin and it’s none of our business. Jesus expects us to confront that person. This isn’t just the pastor’s job. All of us share this work of calling our brothers and sisters to repent. When I sin against you, I damage my relationship with my Father in heaven. I cannot truly repair my relationship with you until I repent, until I acknowledge that what I did was a sin, not just a misunderstanding, not just a failure to

communicate, not just a moment of weakness. It was an act of rebellion against God because he commands us to love our neighbor as our self.

So Jesus says that if your brother sins against you, go and speak to him, just between the two of you. Keep the matter private and protect the reputation of the person you're talking to. So you're not going to win an argument. You're going to save that person from hell. Sin festers in our hearts. When we don't repent of it, it grows and becomes more and more powerful. Eventually, it will overwhelm our faith. If we die in unrepented sin, we will spend eternity in hell. So Jesus tells you to go and save your brother or sister from their own sin. If they repent, he tells you to announce that Christ died for them and to forgive them. But if they won't, he tells you to bind their sin to them. To tell them that they are not forgiven and they are in danger of hell.

And when it's clear that you're getting nowhere, he tells you to bring one or two other Christians along and speak to that person again. You're not off the hook, although at this point, you may bring in your pastor or a member of the board of elders, because you trust their understanding of God's word. Together, you are still trying to bring that person to confess their sin so that you can announce their forgiveness. If that happens, that's wonderful! But if not, when it becomes clear that that brother will not listen, Jesus says **"Tell it to the church."** At that point, it becomes the whole congregation's responsibility. We may need to meet as a body, and call that member to confess their sin and turn away from it. If they do, we will assure them that Christ has forgiven them. We will comfort them and do all in our power to make sure that they understand that we still love them and want them to be a part of our spiritual family.

But if they don't repent, Jesus tells us to treat them like a pagan or a tax collector – like an unbeliever. The technical term for this is excommunication. That person who was a member of our church, who may still claim that they believe, is no longer a believer because they refuse to repent. And it has nothing to do with how big or how little the sin is. It has everything to do with a refusal to turn from the sin.

That's the job Jesus gives to you and me. Does it sound like fun? It is hard to do. If you're anything like me, it creates a pit in your stomach just thinking about it. So why would we ever do this? We don't want that person to go to hell. Even excommunication is a final preaching of God's law to break the pride of their heart and drive them to repent. If we're unwilling to do that for each other, we have a problem with sin. We love ourselves too much to go through the upset and the conflict and the anger that we'll experience. We'd rather just stay home. But that's not the only way we can sin in this. We can fail to trust that God's Word will work. We just give up and figure it's no use. That's a failure of our faith. Or we can be so self-righteous that we drive that person further from God. Or we can go thinking that this is our chance to make that person pay. And again, we have a problem with pride and sin.

Are you guilty of that pride and sin? Do you trust God's Word to work? Do you love your brothers and sisters enough to call them to repent? Do you love them enough to dedicate the many hours this kind of work requires? Or do you have to admit that the sinner in your heart rebels at the very thought of it? Clearly, we don't deserve the love of God if we're unwilling to love each other. But Jesus died because we love ourselves first of all. Jesus died because we don't trust that he is working through his word. Jesus died because we don't want to face how hard this is. He paid for all that sin. He rose and God has forgiven us even for loving ourselves more than others, even for failing to call each other to repent. All that sin is gone forever. Now, he calls us to love each other and to endure the stress and the angry words and call each other to repent. He calls us to put the eternal life of the people around us ahead of our own comfort here and now. And he calls us to trust that we will never go on this kind of a mission alone. We have his word, his law and his gospel. They will do the work he sends them to do. **Jesus works through us. He's behind the power he gave us.**

II.

God gave that power to us, the Church. He did that because the Church is not a human organization. Now, Peace Lutheran congregation is a human arrangement. So is the WELS. But because of the believers gathered within us, the Church is here. Jesus said, **"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."** This is Christ's definition of the Church on earth. Two or three come together in his name. What does that mean? Coming together in his name means coming together in faith. It means coming together around his word and sacraments, because that's how he works. And it means coming together to do his work. That's what he's talking about in this section: using the keys, the law and the gospel.

When we come together, Jesus is with us. You can't see him, but he is here, right now. In one sense, Jesus is always with us. He promised to watch over us and protect us. That's true here, too. But in another

sense, he's with us when we gather in faith around the word and sacraments to do his work. He's here in power. He's here working in that law and gospel. Every word of law that you heard today, and the guilt or the fear that you felt, that was Jesus working. And every word of promise and forgiveness that stilled those fears and made you glad to know your Savior, that was Jesus, too, working in your heart through the gospel.

Jesus said, **“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.”** How often haven't we prayed that his word would work, here and throughout the world? How often haven't we asked him to comfort the sick and dying and mourning? God hears our prayer that he would put his power to use. When we ask him to bless the proclamation of the word he's given us, he's working. Now, Jesus does not mean that it's always going to come out the way that we think it should. Sometimes, he has a deeper purpose than we can see. But he does mean that when we bind and when we loose, it is as valid and certain in heaven as if Christ himself had done it. That means that it has power here on earth to change hearts and to heal lives.

And in a more general sense, when we gather and offer our prayers together, God promises to hear and answer them all. Those prayers are more than just filler to make sure we use up our whole hour on Sunday morning. They're the prayers of Christ's church on earth. God gives every one of them his full attention. He answers every one in the way that best serves our faith. That's a tremendous comfort as we move forward as a congregation. Because we have the word, because we have the sacraments, because we have gathered in Jesus' name trusting in his promises, we are part of his Church. Where two or three come together in his name, he is with us. He is working in us and through us. He is listening to our prayers and sending us out to do his work! **Jesus works through us. He is with us when we gather in his name.**

God is building a house, a spiritual house. He is building the true Church of Christ. Often, it looks like we're the ones who are working and often, that seems like a disaster. So many times, Christians fail to act like the people of God. So many times, Christians fail to trust in God and they try all kinds of other things to do his work and over and over again, we fail. The devil and the world around us often seemed to have defeated the Church. But the work goes on even in disasters and disappointments, because the word of Christ works. He builds his Church when we do no more or less than to proclaim that word. Take comfort in that truth, because it means we cannot fail. Christ is working! Amen.