

What Is Real

Matthew 18:1-20

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 11, 2017

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

Is the Lord really serious? Is the Lord really suggesting that I cut off my hand or my foot? Is the Lord really suggesting that I cut out my eye? Isn't the Lord using hyperbole here? Hyperbole is when you overstate the case in order to convey how seriously the point should be taken. Interpreters have used the concept of hyperbole to rule out what the Lord is actually suggesting that we cut off our hands or cut off our feet or pluck out our eyes.

The problem with saying that this is hyperbole is that the rest of it is not hyperbole. Think about it. Which is better? To rise from the dead with one hand and live forever in life everlasting or to have two hands and go to hell?

Now admittedly our congregation has studied the resurrection of the dead and no one will rise from the dead with one hand. The point of the resurrection is the full restoration of the functionality of the body. Therefore not only will your bodies have hands when you rise from the dead, they also will not sin.

So perhaps the Lord is stretching the language a bit and hyperbole is not totally out of the question. But the question is a serious question and it has an obvious answer. Which is better? To rise from the dead on the last day and live forever in splendor and glory minus a hand or to have two hands and go to hell?

The same answer is easy to give with our Lord's other two examples. Which is better? To rise from the dead with one eye or to have two eyes and go to hell? Which is better to rise from the dead and live in glory albeit lame, or to have both feet working perfectly and go into hell where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched?

And why is our Lord on about this? He is on about this because it is bad enough that people sin, but woe to the one through whom the temptations to sin come. Don't you know that if you tempt a little one into sin you are tempting someone who has an angel that is looking at the face of the Father in heaven?

Anyone who leads a little one into sin will suffer so terribly badly in hell, that it would be better for him if he had a large millstone, one of the two ton variety that the donkeys pushed around in the ancient world, hung around his neck and he be cast into the sea. Would you like to have a two ton millstone attached to your neck and be thrown into the sea? Well, then if you don't want that then you will not want what you will suffer in hell if you should guide a little one into sin!

What is the chief way of guiding a little one into sin? By letting them sin! The chief way to guide a child into sin is by letting them sin. A child is going to find sin anyway. Temptations are sure to come as our Lord states. And while you can teach a child to sin and guide them into sin in which case you will face eternal fire where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched, you can more easily lead a child into sin by not correcting them when they do sin.

It starts out small. The child does something to harm another and you say nothing hoping that they will mature out of it. The child disobeys you and you say nothing because you want your child to obey you willingly. The child disobeys the teacher and school and you figure out how it is the teacher's fault rather than back the teacher who is trying to education your child. The child drinks a beer under age and you say nothing because you don't respect the rule of the state anyway. The child drives recklessly

and you say nothing because by now you have made a habit of saying nothing and you do not wish to face what would happen if you said something to your child. Your child fornicates and is promiscuous and you say nothing because by this time he is an adult and you figure that he should manage his own affairs. But at one time this was a little one and now he is a big one and he goes uncorrected. The child will be in hell and you will be worse off in hell for temptations were sure to come to your child, but woe to those by whom they came. They came by you because you said nothing to correct your child. You let the sheep wander off by itself and you figured that it would be ok somehow. Surely a wolf would not eat it. Surely it would not go anywhere dangerous. Surely it would find food on its own.

So if on the basis of this sermon so far you think that children should be corrected for their sins, what about fellow members of the congregation? Are they not children of their heavenly Father? Are they not little ones in the eyes of God? Are we not all to become like little children for it is little children who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven? Aren't children greatest in the Kingdom of heaven? Aren't they greatest in the kingdom of heaven precisely because they do not achieve anything?

A child does not achieve anything. A child achieves what its parents achieve. How many times did you hold the spoon for your child while he or she was learning to eat? How many times did you hold the glass or the cup for the child while the child was learning to eat? Can the child take credit for these things? And yet it would have starved had you not done these things. Can the child take credit for putting food on the table or clothes on his back? And how long did you dress him before he figured out how to dress himself? Even when he did learn to dress himself, did he provide the clothing? Did he pay for them? Did he have a job and an income? When your child does have a job can they take credit for the education that they received to obtain that job? Did they pay for their education? And so a child cannot take credit for anything. Everything is provided for the child. And so it is in the Kingdom of heaven. Those who are great in the Kingdom of heaven are those who cannot provide for themselves. If you cannot provide for yourself in the Kingdom of Heaven then you are one of God's little ones and woe to anyone who leads you into sin. Woe to anyone who does not correct you when you sin. Woe to anyone who allows you to go off and wander away from the flock of God assuming that if a person wanders away from the flock of God that everything will somehow be ok.

And so Jesus lays it out. If someone in the congregation sins, if you are aware of the sin, you are required to point out the sin to your brother or sister in Christ. If you do not, woe to you. You are allowing them to enter into temptation. Admittedly it must be a sin, a violation of one of God's commandments, but if it is, then your Lord requires you to say something. If you say nothing, you are leading them into sin. If they listen, then you have won your brother or sister. By listening the Lord means that they admit their fault. But if they refuse to listen either because they think that what they are doing is not wrong in the eyes of the Lord or they do not think that you have the right to correct them, then you take one or two others along so that their refusal to listen may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he listens then, you have gained your brother. If he refuses to listen, tell it to the congregation. If he refuses to listen to the congregation, excommunicate him. Because if you let one sin go in the congregation pretty soon everyone in the congregation thinks that they can do it. A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

And if this procedure that comes straight out of the mouth of the Lord seems unchristian to you, then you need to check your own faith.

There are some of you who believe that the language in our congregation's constitution that reflects what our Lord plainly commands here in Matthew 18 should not be in the constitution of a

Christian congregation. Why not? Are you accusing the Lord of saying something wrong? Is He a liar? Is He mean? Is He cruel?

No, the Lord simply understands what is real.

First of all, God is real.

Secondly, God is holy. No one defiled by sin and death may stand in His presence. If sinful, unholy people may stand in the presence of your God, then you do not have a holy God. If you do not have a holy God, you do not have the real God. Repent.

Thirdly, if sinners cannot stand in the presence of God, then unless they are made fit to stand in His presence, they will be cast out of His presence for all of life everlasting. To be out of the presence of God is to be in hell.

Fourthly, God has provided the means by which sinners are made fit to stand in the presence of the holy God. It requires first of all atonement. God provided atonement for your sins when His Son died upon the cross. When He died He purified you from all of your uncleanness of sin and death.

Fifthly, when Jesus provided this atonement, He purified you of sin and death, but that means that you are a new creature in Christ Jesus. If you are new creature in Christ Jesus sin is laid aside along with death.

That means that anyone who is not laying aside their sins and confessing them as sins before almighty God is an unbeliever.

If you have received the full forgiveness of your sins, then when confronted with your sins, you should not shy away from them, but confess them. If your brother in Christ, points out your sins to you and you are truly someone who admits that you are a sinner, then when a brother points out your sins to you, you agree with the brother.

To respond to a brother in anger like he does not have the right to point out your sins to you is to say before God and your brother that you have some sort of righteousness of your own that lifts you above the accusations of a brother in Christ. What righteous do you have that is your own? What do you have that you did not receive? If you believe that you do have a righteousness of your own such that a brother is not permitted to point out your sins to you, then you believe that you are saved by your good works. You are no better than the Pharisees over whom the Lord pronounced seven woes and by doing so cast them into hell.

To respond to a brother who is pointing out your sins with anger because you do not think that he has the right to point out your sins to you is to respond in anger to someone who is trying to save you from hell.

Or do you not believe in hell? Or do you not believe in the holiness of God? Or do you not believe in the reality of God's judgment? Or do you not believe in the reality of God's wrath?

Would you honestly let a drunk continue to be a drunk? Would you honestly let a drug addict continue to be a drug addict? Would you not do something? And if you would do something, I have to ask you why? Because you know that if they continue in these behaviors they will harm themselves and others around them.

Then why allow a sinner to continue in his sin unless you believe either there is no God, or God is not holy, or God is not wrathful against sin, or Jesus Christ has not created a new humanity by His death and resurrection eradicating our sinfulness before God and giving us His righteousness. Any of those positions denies the reality that has come to us in Christ Jesus. You have to be denying one these realities in order to read Matthew, chapter 18, and say to yourself, "I am not going to do that. Furthermore I think it is wrong to do that." Repent!

The sheep will get lost. They will go astray. There is only one way to get them back. But do you believe what you believe? Or are you just in Divine Service to give lip service to Him? Do you honestly believe that where two or three are gathered in His name there is He in the midst of them? Or is that just a nice theological idea to justify the existence of small congregations?

If it is not the will of your Father in heaven that any one of these little ones should perish, then why should that be your will?

And if your will is conformed to the will of your Father in heaven, then you will rejoice over the one sheep who was found than over the ninety-nine who did not wander off.

This is why it dismays me when I hear of complaints in the congregation that baptismal services are too long. Anyone who complains that a baptismal service is too long must answer whether or a baptism means that lost sheep has come home! Is baptism a baptism of repentance? And if it is as the apostles say that it is, then the lost sheep who is baptized has come home! The joy should be such that you think that the baptism service is too short because it cannot possibly express the glories of what is happening.

There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent. And has many of you know there is no such thing as ninety-nine righteous people, but the Lord is saying that even if there were such righteous people the Lord would still be happier with the ones who repent.

And unless you are pretending and living in some kind of false reality, then the joy of the one who returns whether it is you yourself or another member of the congregation with whom you are speaking is also your joy and your joy is complete.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.