

## ***Teach Me***

**Sermon 216 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 17, 2024  
Matthew 18:15-22**

The other night Justin and I were doing some research, looking up places to camp and hike and we came across Cades Cove. Have any of you been there?

It is said to be one of the most beautiful places to visit in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, with hikes and historic homesites, all kinds of interesting sites dating back to the early 1800s. There's an 11-mile loop road that attracts bikers; and it's so popular that the road is actually closed to cars on Wednesdays so cyclists can travel without worrying about automobile traffic. If you choose to make the loop, you're likely to see wild turkeys, white-tailed deer, groundhogs, skunks, and maybe even a black bear!

You'll also see historic cemeteries and homesites dating back 200 years when the European settlers arrived and began building their homesteads. According to several travel sites, the *most* interesting thing to see in Cades Cove is the cantilever barn which dates back to the 19th century and has the most curious design. The base, the walls that touch the ground, only make up about 1/3 of the square footage, the rest of the barn extends beyond the foundation and seems to hover above the ground, almost like the top of a mushroom.

As interesting as that may be, this isn't what caught our attention. If we were to make the loop, the short 11-mile journey through the cove, we would pass three churches. Three! In 11 miles.

One Methodist church, marked by two front doors, separate entrances for men and women. And two baptist churches. Three churches on one 11-mile loop.

Now, while I'd like to think things could be different, I can wrap my mind around the Methodists and Baptists wanting separate houses of worship. But the Baptists? What is that about?

Well, the first church (now the Primitive Baptist Church) started out in 1827 as just Cades Cove Baptist Church. Things seemed to be going fine for the first 14 years. But then they discovered some irreconcilable differences in their interpretation of scripture. You see, some of them felt that they should be doing missionary work and some of them were vehemently opposed. From that schism, two churches were born: the Primitive Baptist Church and the Missionary Baptist Church.

It seems Christians and perhaps particularly the Baptist kind, are better at loosing than we are at binding. The language of binding and loosing is pretty uncommon in the Gospels. There are some references to binding in the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament). These often refer to covenantal relationships to which one is "bound." There are several examples of this in the scripture, of covenants that bind together God and humanity. But those seem to be obscured by our past, left now to the realm of biblical scholars and professional exegetes.

Perhaps the best example, or at least the most common way that we remember and apply this principle is in the ways we think about marriage. We consider marriage to be covenant between two people, something visible and human, but also deeply spiritual.

In marriage, two people are bound together and that binding is so strong that it lasts for all of time. It is holy, beyond what we could understand here, on earth. *"What God has joined together, let no one tear asunder,"* we say.

But when Jesus employs that covenantal language he isn't talking about marriage. No, Jesus is establishing a new and dynamic covenant between Peter (by extension the disciples), the church, and the kingdom of heaven. And this covenant bestows authority and also accountability.

*Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,  
And whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*

The next (and only other time) that Jesus mentions binding and loosing is in today's reading from Matthew 18. The context is: Jesus has been teaching the disciples about life in community. Though the narrative is largely driven by the disciples' questions, Jesus' answers seem far more expansive than the

questions that propel the teaching. Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? A question intended to narrow down to one.

You have to become like children or you will never even *enter* the kingdom... Whoever welcomes the little ones welcomes me, (Paraphrase, Mt. 18:1-5).

An answer with ever-expanding possibility.

Then Jesus goes on teaching:

“What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven, that one of these little ones should be lost.”

Then he goes on a bit more, teaching about how to resolve conflict by continually seeking out the other... Seeking reconciliation with the persistence of the shepherd searching for the one lost sheep.

There is a trend emerging here... where the agents of the Kingdom take on a perpetual posture of seeking, bringing in... shall we go so far as to say *binding*? Jesus' teaching here culminates with an absurd hyperbole on forgiveness. But then again we have to wonder... is he serious?

*How many times must I seek this person out? How many times should we allow them to sin against us? Where is the limit to this grace about which you teach, Jesus?*

“Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times,” (Mt. 18:22).

Surely this was an exaggeration? For... seventy times seven is 490. Surely Jesus doesn't expect *that* much forgiveness. And is this for each incident? Each wrong? Each sin committed? Or is this like an out-of-pocket maximum, where we keep a year-long tally and once we reach 490 acts of forgiveness we can hang it up until the clock or the count resets?

But if we read the parable that follows - which is about the forgiveness of financial debt - it reinforces the absurdity of this forgiveness about which Jesus is teaching:

*Are we really to forgive so freely, so abundantly, so radically?*

Seventy times seven. The disciples search for an answer. An absolute. A clearly defined limit to the gifts of God. Jesus continues to eradicate the limits altogether. Maybe Jesus understood the eternal significance of our binding and loosing? After all, it was Jesus who said: *Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.*

I have to admit this is a tricky passage; perhaps the trickiest of all the weeks in this series on Peter and our *Wandering Hearts*.

The simplest reading would take Jesus' instructions as a step-by-step guide for how we might reconcile our differences with one another. That would be a fair way to apply the text. But it would make for a really short sermon, and it would miss the bigger picture of Jesus' teaching. (in my opinion)

Another way we could interpret this teaching would be to focus only on forgiveness. And that would be a fair way to apply the text as well. Maybe we need to forgive someone, to get past a grudge we have been harboring for far too long. Or maybe we find ourselves in need of forgiveness, and this is a reminder that God's forgiveness is inexhaustible. That feels like a lifeline when we are drowning in seas of guilt and shame.

But today I can't stop thinking about that pesky and peculiar little phrase that popped up in the text, and reminds us of its presence a couple of weeks ago when Jesus was talking to Peter:

*Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven...*

Surely Peter remembered that phrase from the time when Jesus called him the rock. Surely Peter's ears perked up when he heard Jesus say it again. (They say repetition is one of the best ways a student can learn.)

So looking at this scripture through the eyes of Peter who has been on this wandering journey with Jesus: At first a follower, then a courageous disciple, then the prophet who names the lordship of Christ, then a stumbling block with sorely misplaced priorities, and now a student, humbled by his own misgivings and ready to learn... yet still asking for the limits of God's love to be defined by a number (*How many times... is it 7 or 490?*)...

So today I wonder if there is some wisdom to be found in the midst of binding and loosing?

*"Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven."*

You know I hate to say it but as I think about our history, not just Greystone but our much longer history as Baptists and as Christians, I worry that we never really learned this lesson with Peter. I worry that we have inherited a tradition of loosing that is more reflective of the disciples' need for definition and limitation than it is of Jesus' constant correction toward welcome, inclusion, and expansive grace.

*What shepherd who has 99 sheep on a mountain wouldn't go after the one...?*

What kind of church full of faithful Jesus followers warm and settled in their pews wouldn't leave their place of comfort and go after the one who wasn't sure if they were invited... the one who was on the receiving end of all the hateful rhetoric...the one overlooked and under-resourced... the one who was kicked out, called names, and cast aside... you know... the *little* ones? What kind of Christian wouldn't leave their places of comfort and go after them?

Maybe the kind that are too fixated with the question concerning the limits of God's love.

*How many times must we forgive?*

Peter wanted to know. Surely there is a limit... ? I know I'm guilty of that same preoccupation, that misplaced fixation, as I've tried to find excuses for

the limits of my love, my grace, and my forgiveness. But I suppose that is just a symptom of my tendency toward loosing.

You know, there is one more peculiar thing about this text. It has to do with the numbers. In the original language, the way it's written, we know that Jesus expands the number of times one must offer forgiveness. The expected number would be seven. But that isn't what Jesus says. Furthermore, there is a discrepancy in the different translations because we cannot be sure whether Jesus told the disciples to forgive seventy-seven times or seventy times seven (490). Now there's a big gap between 77 and 490. It is a difference of 413. But both numbers are extravagant, don't you think?

Can you imagine actually forgiving someone who owed you something, who did you wrong, who was awful to you 77 times?! Whatever Jesus said - whether it was 77 or seventy times seven - it's a really high bar. And, I kind of love that we can't ever be sure, that the language itself is ambiguous for us, because that fact alone keeps us asking (just like Peter) *how much is enough?*

And if we *learn* as we go, we might eventually realize that we will never exhaust the limits of God's forgiveness. And therefore, any forgiveness that we need to ask for is also never too much. And furthermore, any forgiveness that we might offer is never too much.

I guess Jesus knew that whatever is bound on earth is bound in heaven. And maybe Jesus was teaching us that we are all bound to one another... eternally. Bound in what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called:

“an inescapable network of mutuality,  
tied in a single garment of destiny.” And in that bind,  
King rightly stated that,  
“I can never be what I ought to be  
until you are what you ought to be,  
and you can never be what you ought to be  
until I am what I ought to be...”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. 1963.

Our lives are all intimately and intricately woven together; and in that togetherness, there is bound to be some pain, some hurt, some grief, some anger, some misunderstanding, and some downright disagreement but these do not have to end our commitment to one another and our responsibility *FOR* one another. That is what covenant is all about - working through pain, confessing our failures, forgiving one another, and in so doing we *all experience healing*. Because when our relationships are broken, we ourselves are broken. When we lose people, we lose part of ourselves too.

And our work, our calling, our mission as disciples of Jesus is to go out and bind up all that is loose and has been loosed, to seek out those who have wandered away, those who have been asked to leave, those who have been told that they didn't matter, that they were a disappointment or an abomination to God.

It is our job and our calling, for all of us who have found that we BELONG here and call ourselves disciples of Jesus, to go after them, with haste, like the shepherd who sees the one walking away from the 99, we are to go after them and beg for forgiveness - knowing it might be too much to ask - because of the wounds our institution and our history have inflicted. Because it took us too long to get there.

It may be too much to ask... for the little ones to forgive us but we must confess to our wrongdoing, ask for forgiveness anyway, because if we are going to get serious about changing the course of our history (the one where we need 3 churches every 11 miles) if we are going to get serious about the work of binding on earth as we are all bound in heaven, then we need to get real comfortable with difference and disagreement and discomfort.

And I believe that what Jesus is teaching us, right here in the Gospel of Matthew... is that reconciliation is always possible and it all starts by asking for, and offering, an absurdly hyperbolic amount of forgiveness.