

A Proper 18 2026
Saint Barnaba Church, Falmouth MA
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Matthew 18:15-20

Has anyone ever done you wrong?

Whether neighbor, work colleague, family member or fellow parishioner, has anyone gained your trust and then subsequently abused it?

The more sensitive follow-up question jumps off the page: have you ever abused someone's trust in a way that threatens the relationship?

Either question can send us down a dark rabbit hole of hurt, anger, rumination and—particularly my second question—defensiveness

If love makes the world go round, estrangement can bring us to our knees—we all need more of love and less angst

Everything I have said so far may seem like a firm grasp of the obvious to anyone who has navigated life's vicissitudes of family life, romantic love, neighborly relations or workplace culture

We could fill the day with each of our stories regarding love and loss, and God knows that today's culture indulges in anger that has become the rage

You and I have unique stories that we may enjoy sharing or prefer being boiled in a vat of oil before disclosing

Whatever our mix and match of relational stuff and however much we have been blessed or burned by others, I invite you to bring your humanity to today's gospel story from Matthew

Today's story—and its continuation next Sunday—comes from what scholars call Jesus's Fourth Discourse in which Jesus addresses the real-world concerns of his embryonic Church

Especially while Jesus still roamed the earth, some might assume that his tight-knit community would be all peaches and kumbaya

After all, he's the master, they're all on a thrilling ride of a lifetime to heal the sick and save the world

Yet disputes break out, grudges fester, and like summer fires from Canada, paradise can vaporize before our very eyes

Rather than mud wrestling or playing the victim card, however, Jesus proposes ways to address sin and promote reconciliation that are as meaningful today as when he sat down for the Last Supper

Jesus reminds us that the perfect remains the enemy of the good and that all human relationships take place among textured, quirky people

Give up fairytale fantasies, Jesus beckons, to claim your own mixed humanity, along with that of the other person

A week ago yesterday, I presided at a wedding, and our liturgy has a prayer that comes immediately after the vows asking that when the two parties hurt each other—not *if* they hurt each other—may they seek each other's forgiveness and yours

With spiritual DNA well back into the Hebrew scriptures, Jesus admonishes us to seek reconciliation within human community rather than with God

In other words, reconciliation must happen within community—not in private prayer—if it is to lead to transformation and right behavior

To make his point, Jesus specifically uses the word ‘sin’ (Greek = *harmartano*), which means “to miss the mark” and thus “to fail”

This word appears only three times in Matthew—including, again, next Sunday—with the third use reserved for when Judas betrays Jesus

So we regularly need to clean up our stuff, whether it constitutes a little failure or a capital crime

Jesus also channels ancient Leviticus (19:17-18), which states: "You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall **reprove** your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD."

Who wants to parse the difference between ‘vengeance’ and ‘retribution’

Jesus reminds us that reconciliation requires truth telling and perhaps tough-love confrontation as a reality check to get everyone’s attention

Notice that today’s text never uses the word ‘forgiveness’

It may be implied, and we will hear it next week, but forgiveness comes only after honest dialogue and some commitment to amend our ways by the person who has caused pain

Otherwise, forgiveness acts as cheap grace that rarely heals

One of my favorite parts of our Anglican heritage comes in its no-nonsense, pastoral approach to reconciliation among real people with all their foibles

We don't look the other way or pretend to make nice: if we follow the spirit of today's passage, we speak the truth in love, avoid trash talking an adversary, and use the community to support reconciliation where it is needed

Amid today's Golden Age of Retribution, we take a strikingly different tack

We pray for healing and amendment of life to foster human flourishing and transformative concern for others

We deal with stuff to heal it and move on with life, rather than marinating in grudges and ill will

I suspect that the creators of our lectionary reading cycle placed today's passage in its place as we come out of summer and ramp up our autumn program life of church community

I don't know about you, but I am a sucker for the Sunday before Labor Day, with its joyful expectation as our students have returned to school and have jumped into new relationships or conversations

Next Sunday, we return to autumn worship schedule and opportunities to learn some new stuff while deepening the bonds of our affection and community

Our search committee has hit its stride with the goal of leaping tall buildings, creating a new website and publishing a search profile to recruit our next rector

As we move into autumn mode, let's dream new dreams about how we connect to our larger community while addressing the needs of the most vulnerable among us

Call it wildly aspiration, or simply call it the Christian way of life

We worship together, we celebrate on our good days and aim for honesty and reconciliation on our most challenging days

Amid our daily rhythms and during those big-deal defining moments of parish, community, work or national life, we pray for God's presence, divine inspiration and yearning for our transformation amid this earthly journey

As Jesus reminds us in today's final sentence: "For when two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."