

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 15
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Sermon by Pastor Chris Pflughoeft
The church tells it straight

¹⁵“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his sin just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother. ¹⁶But if he will not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And, if he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as an unbeliever or a tax collector. ¹⁸Amen I tell you: Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Amen I tell you again: If two of you on earth agree to ask for anything, it will be done for them by my Father who is in heaven. ²⁰In fact where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am among them.”

—Matthew 18:15-20

Are you a good friend or a bad friend? Right away you have probably thought about how involved you are in your friend's life. Maybe, you thought of things you have done or gifts you have given. These are not the only markers of being a good friend though. A good friend is willing to tell it straight. If your friend is stuck in a serious problem, she needs you to bring her the hard truth. Now, you will want to speak the truth in love, but a good friend tells it straight. That is the type of friend I want. That is the type of friend that I want to be.

If we want friends who speak hard truth, how much more shouldn't that be a quality of the church? As we consider the church that God wants, we see that God wants a church that tells the people the truth and does not want a church that just tells sweet lies. As Jesus instructs today, we see **the church tells it straight**.

In the text for our consideration today, Jesus outlines a proper approach for confronting a brother in Christ who sins against you. As we consider this text, we see how Christ desires that believers reach out to one another in love. Christ desires that they call out each other's sins. Christ desires that they proclaim forgiveness to one another. As we consider this text, we will also dispel some false thoughts that people have added to this section which has become the 'church disciple' section. Ultimately, we see the church God wants: **the church tells it straight**.

As we approach this text, we must consider first what Jesus is talking about. This is not a prescription for how confronting another person's sin must always happen. Jesus is not saying that it must always happen in a formulaic way – step 1... step 2... step 3... As we saw in the reading from Galatians, sometimes in love, we deal with sin differently. Peter's public sin needed to be dealt with publicly.

What Jesus is doing here is he speaks about a pattern of persistently reaching out to a brother or sister who is caught up in sin to draw them out of this sin. By the conditional "if... then..." statements that Jesus begins with, we know that Jesus is talking about confronting a person who is in danger of being separated from God by his sins. Yet, we are to call out the sins of our brothers even if we don't fear they will lose their faith. All sins are dangerous. Any sin can be faith-destroying.

Here is the pattern that Jesus sets forward: First, if your brother sins against you confront him just between the two of you. Now, this sin does not have to be physically against you. If you witness your brother in Christ sinning, he is sinning against you. If he listens to you, good work! The goal is that the preaching of God's law draws this person to repentance. Be sure to follow it up with proclaiming forgiveness in Jesus to this person.

Second, if your brother does not listen to you and refuses to repent of his sin, then Jesus calls you to bring this matter to other brothers and sisters in Christ. Echoing a principle found in Deuteronomy 19, Jesus says to bring one or two witnesses along with you. As a group of two or three, your goal is to bring God's law before this erring brother. The goal is not to simply gang up on him. Now, if your brother listens to you as a group, again good job. The goal is that the preaching of God's law draws this person to repentance. Be sure to follow it up with proclaiming forgiveness in Jesus to this person.

Third, if your brother still does not listen to you and refuses to repent, Jesus says bring this to the church. This is the gathering of believers. This step hopes that the testimony of God's law from the gathering of fellow believers would drive this person to see his or her need for repentance. If this person refuses to listen to the testimony of the church, then you continue to the final step.

In the final step, Jesus says that now you are to treat this individual as an unbeliever. The text says pagan or tax collector. We do not want to get caught up on what that means. Take it at face value. If this person continues in his or her sin, then Christ instructs the church to separate that person from them. This final step is called 'excommunication.' It is not always a popular topic, but this is the most loving thing that the church can do for this person.

How is excommunication an act of love? Excommunication is an act of love because it is a strong preaching of God's law meant to show this person that his continuation in sin has separated him from God. He has lost his saving faith.

His sins have revealed the truth. He is not a believer. He is on the path to hell. Here, **the church tells it straight**. Out of love, the church tells this person what he needs to hear which is a strong preaching of God's law.

The exercise of church discipline is important. This is not to get rid of the members of the church who are not putting in enough effort. This is not to 'cut off the deadwood.' This is not to kick out those we don't like. But the exercise of church discipline is important. This is because it is a loving action. This is because God has called the church to do it. When it comes to the preaching of the law and the exercise of church discipline God wants **the church to tell it to them straight**.

The end goal in all of this, **the church telling it straight**, is to regain the straying brother or sister. The church tells it straight regarding the law to show a person their need of a Savior. Then, the church tells it straight regarding the gospel too. This is seen in Jesus' speaking about the ministry of the keys. The church is called to proclaim the forgiveness of sins to the repentant sinner. One who is repentant needs to hear it straight up. His sins are forgiven in Jesus Christ. The impenitent person also needs to hear it straight up. His sins are not forgiven. In proclaiming law and gospel, **the church tells it straight**.

At the end of this section, Jesus assures his disciples that God hears them as the church on account of him. When they pray together... when they work together... when they worship together... when they exercise church discipline together... Jesus is with them. This truth gives them the confidence to speak hard truth.

Consider again how a good friend tells it straight. Now, consider being a good friend during difficult situations. Let's say that you have a long-time friend named Mike. Now, Mike has begun to do some questionable things. Mike is going out drinking more often than he used to. He is also getting behind the wheel at times that you don't think he should. You have heard that Mike's performance at work is slipping too. You suspect that Mike may be drinking throughout the day. Not only do you notice problems with Mike's behavior, but you also notice issues in his relationships. So, what do you do?

Option 1: You don't want to embarrass Mike. Also, you don't want to make him mad. So, you decide to just let these things go. You want to keep things cordial with him. Out of fear of ruining your friendship, you decide not to speak hard truths to Mike.

Result: One day, Mike, who has now been steadily drinking throughout the day, gets behind the wheel with his kids in the car. Mike and his kids get in a fatal car accident. Now, you feel ashamed of your failure to speak up. Now, Mike and his kids are gone.

Option 2: You notice Mike's poor behavior and talk to him about it. You share your concerns with him. You offer to be there to help him.

First Potential Result: Mike gets mad at you for your confrontation. Mike does not stop. After a time of not talking to you, Mike gets into a fatal car accident because he was drinking and driving.

Second Potential Result: Mike hears what you said. He confides in you the reason for his drinking. You can be there with Mike through his recovery.

We need to tell it to people straight in our relationships. Beating around the bush about important topics and big problems is a characteristic of a bad friend. Failing to tell it to people straight can result in dire consequences.

If you as a friend need to speak hard truths to people, how much more important is it that this is a quality of the church? Although people may not always like it when the church is straight about sin and forgiveness that is exactly what God wants of a church. **The church tells it straight**.

People may have a sinful desire for the church to tell sweet little lies regarding church discipline for live-in situations. Whether it is the couple themselves, or even their parents, people want the church to tell lies. The lies they want are expressed in the leadership simply ignoring the sinful actions or the pastor saying that their excuses are legit. On the other hand, people may desire to have the church not tell it straight about sin and grace. "Tell me that my sins are forgiven. But him? And Her? Do you know what they did!" Have you been guilty of this line of thinking? Desiring that the church fails to tell it straight is a sin.

So, thank God that **the church tells it straight**. Give thanks to God that he has sent you ministers to tell it straight. God has sent you ministers to preach the law. We preach the law to kill. The people who are in the process of church discipline need this stern law just as we do for desiring a church that doesn't speak hard truths. Yet, God has sent you ministers to proclaim the truth about forgiveness as well. We preach the gospel. We proclaim the word of life. This gospel of life is that all your sins are forgiven in Jesus. He lived, died, and rose for you. There is forgiveness for those caught up in sin. You are forgiven of your sins.

In our lesson today, Jesus talks about how **the church is to tell it straight**. This is the church that God wants. Let us not look for the church to tell us sweet little lies. Instead, we want the church to be straight up with us about sin and grace. Amen.

