

Sermon – Matthew 18:15-20
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“Crossing Out Sin”

Sisters and brothers, friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. While I enjoy connecting and communicating via Facebook, I confess that the vast remainder of social media is a mystery to me. I’ve never tweeted or tik toked. I don’t know an Insta from a Snap. I’m not LinkedIn professionally and I’ve never had enough interest to pin a recipe. I never even had a My Space account! And yes, as I say this, I realize that I will likely soon be yelling at all those young whippersnappers to get their technology off my lawn. Anyway, my point is simply that I likely never would have heard of a social media platform called Yik Yak had I not been told about it by high schoolers at my former church. Now defunct, Yik Yak’s popularity peaked in 2014, particularly on college, high school, and middle school campuses. What, you ask, was Yik Yak? It was a proximity-based, anonymous bulletin board; in other words, it was similar to Twitter but instead of seeing posts by people you followed, you saw posts by everyone within a five-mile radius. And everything – *everything* – was anonymous. What was intended as a means to share news and events with those close by quickly but oh-so-predictably became a means to wreak havoc within student bodies. It was used to bully classmates, to make bomb threats, to shame victims of sexual assault, and to basically allow teenagers to act on their every worst human instinct; and again, to do so anonymously. A CNN article at the time noted that, “Some students have compared it to a virtual bathroom wall where users post vitriol and hate.” I can’t imagine being a teenager, pulling up an app on my

- smart phone, and discovering that the anonymous horde has decided that I should be the victim of the day. It's no wonder the app is now defunct but it's also no wonder it was created in the first place. What do humans love to do more than attack and complain about one another behind each other's backs?
2. While I am not prone to speculative, scholastic theology, I can't help but wonder if Jesus had the future creation of Yik Yak in mind when he spoke the words we hear today from Matthew's Gospel. Then again, seeing two thousand years into the future isn't needed to see into the sinful human heart. We are more than happy to gripe and complain about one another anonymously, but we are not inclined to actually live in relationship and seek reconciliation when sin happens. And sin does happen. It is very much worth noting that Jesus takes it for granted that members of the church are going to sin against one another. After all, wherever two or three are gathered, conflict will arise. The community Christ creates is not one in which sin will not exist; it is one in which sin is meant to be dealt with differently.
 3. This assumption, that sin will happen, is one of several made by Jesus. Jesus is on solid ground making these assumptions because they are grounded in his own life and ministry, culminating in his death and resurrection. The reality of sin is assumed, but Jesus knows God's response; it's why he was born into our world. God's response to human sin, manifested in our broken relationships, is to go to extreme lengths to create and enact forgiveness. God in Christ is willing to die for us. If you look in Matthew's Gospel immediately before our text today, you'll hear Jesus speaking about 100 sheep, one of whom has gone missing. What will Jesus not do to retrieve that sheep? If you read beyond today's passage, which we'll do next Sunday, you'll hear Jesus say that members of the church should forgive each other as many as 77 times, which is to say forgiveness is to flow *ad infinitum*. Grace, on and on and on.

4. Bracketed by his promise to find and forgive even the most lost sheep and his command for us to forgive each other repeatedly is today's text, a bit of a practical how-to guide for Christian forgiveness. I'll say up front that Grace is pretty good at this, but the reminder is always worth hearing; sin is always nipping at our heels. First, go and speak directly to the person who offended you. If they won't listen, take another with you. If they still won't listen, take it to the church. And if they still won't listen, then treat them like a Gentile or a tax collector! Beyond being good advice, this is revolutionary. What if, instead of carping and complaining about each other, we approached one another in love? What if, before we went public, we dealt directly? What if, instead of remaining anonymous, or saying, "Well, everyone is saying," we trusted that God can work the sort of forgiveness among us that we hear about in worship every week? And if all of these steps fail, are we to cast each other out? By no means! In such moments, we are to treat each other as Gentiles and tax collectors who, yes, were seen as outsiders to be avoided *except by Jesus*, who welcomed, forgave, and hung out with such people no matter what the neighbors thought.

5. It is for our sin that Jesus Christ was given to die for us. For his sake God forgives us all our sin. To be sure, one could simply say that if Christ would forgive us, surely we *should* forgive one another. But simple moralizing will not do. Not by half. Christ does not simply call us to change. Christ in his dying and rising, *changes us*. We are remade, and we belong now to one another. This is Paul's argument to the Romans, reminding them that with Christ as our head we are now one body. We have no choice but to be in this together, because that's where God has put us. Together. For this reason, Paul can say, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." In Christ we are connected. We do not harm our neighbor because we are one body.

6. In today's world such thinking is revolutionary. Not simply because we are polarized like never before, although that's part of it. To go deeper, we are dealing with the underbelly of Enlightenment, the prevailing philosophy in the West that echoes the serpent's voice in the garden, that beguiles us with the promise that we are all free actors and, therefore, that the church is nothing more than the voluntary association of autonomous individuals. Paul reminds us, however, that we are not simply a collection of people who gather together on Sundays, remotely or otherwise. We are the church, and we are therefore intrinsically connected to one another through Christ. All it takes is two or three of us together and Christ is present, doing what he always does. Forgiving our sin. Calling us into life. Gifting us to one another. So gifted, we never give up on each other, meeting sin with forgiveness time and time again.

7. I spent part of yesterday doing what I often do these days, watching one of my kids play sports. I sat at Maple Park for an hour watching Anders and his teammates play a baseball game. They played well but not perfectly, though Anders did get his first triple of the season. The point is simply that for an hour on a Saturday afternoon, a bunch of eight-year-old boys, who live in different parts of the village and attend different schools, put on their purple jerseys and worked together as a team. They were bound by a common uniform and a common purpose. With the conviction that perhaps only children can muster, they understood that, win or lose, they were in this together. Watching these kids play baseball is some of the best theology I've ever seen.

8. Friends, we wear a common uniform, too. We have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and clothed in his righteousness. Jesus doesn't demand perfection from us. Rather, he invites us to live in the forgiveness he has first given us. Our world is in search of a word; a word that can transcend deep division; a word that can speak for justice, peace,

and equality; a word that can heal the scars borne by the oppressed and persecuted; a word that can forgive those who have inflicted these wounds. That word is Jesus Christ, who will do anything on earth that we ask of God in heaven. Let's begin by asking Christ to guide us into loving, forgiving relationships with one another; let that be our witness to the world. Christ died to bring us to life. Let's not waste it by yik yakking within the Body of Christ. Instead, let us show each other the grace which Christ shows us, undeserved but abundant. Over and over again. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.