More than once, when I've been at gatherings of pastors, someone has repeated an old, tired, but enduring joke: “Being a pastor would be great if it weren't for all the people.”

Even though they've heard it countless times, everyone usually laughs and then the stories usually start, names withheld to protect the not-so-innocent. It wasn't until I'd logged quite a few years as a pastor that I realized that exactly the same conversations could be going on among members of churches: “This congregation wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the pastor.” I shudder to think about the stories where I've been the main character and my name has **not** been left out.

Matthew tells us that none of this is new. Matthew wrote his gospel to the very first Christians. They were a new community of faith formed by the crucified and risen Christ, whose character and commands the people were bound to follow. You would think that such a community would be filled with excitement and commitment to Jesus, whose ways gave them a clear model to follow in their lives. And yet Matthew wrote openly about sin and brokenness in the new church and about the way to deal with those whose sinful actions threatened the well-being of the body of Christ.

There is something depressing about finding out that the church has been tainted from the very beginning. Yet it is also kind of reassuring when we compare ourselves against those first Christians and find out that sin and conflict have been around in the church since its inception. But Jesus had a plan for that. He gave the church a timeless tool to deal with mischief-makers and sinners in the community. The first thing to note is the Jesus' plan doesn't involve payment for sin as much as it provides for restoration to the flock. In other words, when a member of the church sins, the most important thing is not to see how fast we can get rid of the person, or how we can make sure he or she pays for the transgression, but how we might reestablish the person's place in the family. Jesus' plan recognizes the pervasive nature of sin and places primary importance on repairing the relationships which sin may have affected.

This reminds me of some remarkable work going on in the field of restorative justice. The movement originated among native people of Canada and New Zealand and is slowly spreading to other parts of the world. Its earliest use was among juvenile offenders who had committed non-violent acts against one or more members of a community, things like theft and destruction of property. Members of the criminal justice system knew that they could remove the offender and place him or her in a facility as punishment for the crime. The officials also realized that, once the person had served his or her time, it might be difficult for that person to re-enter the community he or she had left. Wanting to minimize incarcerations for minors, the restorative justice movement began. The way it works is this: everyone who has been affected by an offense by a juvenile or group of juveniles is gathered together in one place. Typically, a gathering will include the offender, his or her family, the victim or victims and their families and representatives of the community where the offense happened. Everyone gets the chance to talk about what happened and how it affected them. Then the group collectively comes up with a solution that satisfies everyone present. Sometimes that means that some kind of punishment is carried out, but mostly the goal is to allow the individual who committed the wrong to make things right and to restore that person to the community that has been affected. It's fascinating to me how such a Christian approach is being used in criminal justice settings and how many success stories are coming out of them.

Jesus is all about restoring someone who has sinned back to the community of faith. It is clear that Jesus will not allow the power of sin to break apart his church, which is founded on forgiveness and compassion. So Jesus came up with the first restorative justice plan, one that works just as well today as it did 2000 years ago. The first step in the plan is the hardest. “If another member of the church sins against you,” Jesus says, “go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” Some of us are really good at letting others – members of our families, friends, other church goers – know when they have done us wrong and we lash out in anger, wanting revenge for the hurt. Others of us keep the hurt deep within and let it fester there. Jesus says neither of those approaches is helpful in the church. Jesus expects someone who has been wronged to approach the wrong-doer in private, not to exact payment for the sin but to bring the person back into the fold much as a shepherd would go after a lost sheep. The challenge is to act out of love and not anger or hurt, to give the offender the chance to make things right so that his or her place in the community is restored.

Jesus continues with his plan: “If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you.” In the hands of vengeful vigilantes, this step could look like a posse rounded up to exact justice. But if we keep in our hearts Jesus' goal of restoration, it can work as beautifully as a successful restorative justice session in a native New Zealand village. As Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote, “With a little more patience and a little less temper, a gentler and wiser method might be found in almost every case.” I would add, “When we approach another with the restorative power of Christ in our hearts, healing will be found in almost every case.”

“If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” This is where many of us let out a sigh of relief. So we've done it all Jesus' way; we've approached wrongdoers alone and with others and have truly tried to get them to see the error of their ways. We've welcomed them back into the fold, but still they're not coming around. We've done our best and now Jesus gives us a break. Now we can treat them like Gentiles and tax collectors, two groups of people that were despised and ridiculed in Jesus' time. No church would want such sleazy characters in their midst. Finally, Jesus' plan allows for a little lee-way and justice can be served! Except. Except, Jesus healed Gentiles. He listened to their hurts and told his disciples he was sent to bring the Gentiles into the kingdom of God. Except. Except Jesus spoke to tax collectors. He included them in his world. Jesus went to the home of one particularly unscrupulous tax collector and he even ate a meal there.

“Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” What starts off sounding like a curse turns out to be a blessing. What started out as a personal Jesus, held close in the bosom of a lucky few who came to know him, became a universal Savior, come to save us from our own judgment and vengeful ways. For Christ's church is a community of imperfect, bumbling, hurtful souls. It is also a place of second chances, of hope and of reconciliation. Jesus' death and resurrection weren't some sort of magic trick performed to show off God's power, but a very real event – an event that infuses his church with his saving grace then sends that church out to share his grace with the world.

The church wouldn't be such a bad place if it weren't for the people. If it weren't for the church's leadership. If it weren't for the pastors. Then again, the church would be nothing without people and leaders. Jesus chose one who would soon betray him to be the foundation of his church. For generations, Jesus has worked through imperfect, sinful creatures to share his message with the world. I, for one, am incredible grateful for Jesus' love, for his forgiveness, for his gift of second chances, as, over the years, I have hurt him and those he has called me to serve. Isn't it amazing that Jesus would chose such broken souls to share his perfect love? He could have come up with a plan to spread the gospel through any means, and he chose us to do the job. Jesus chose a flawed, cracked vessel to fulfill a holy mission. For those who are watching, it is stunning evidence of Jesus' power to forgive, to restore, to heal so that his gospel of love and compassion might be proclaimed and expanded throughout the world. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Amen.

*Pentecost 23A*

*September 7, 2014*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Matthew 18:15-20*