

A Welcoming Community Has Boundaries

Rev. Donald Wachenschwanz

Wall Street United Church

Sunday, September 6th, 2026

Romans 13:8-10 NRSVUE

Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Matthew 18:15-20 NRSVUE

“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a person be to you as a gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Technical Notes used to Prefaced the Sermon

Jesus describes how his disciples will be in a faith community together. Their care for each other includes accountability and boundaries, combined with welcome and compassion. In linguistic context: “Sin” – means go astray, lose one’s way. Earlier in the same chapter, Jesus tells of the shepherd with 100 sheep. One of the sheep goes astray! The shepherd leaves the 99 to find the one.

“Against you” is not in all the original manuscripts Why leave it out? The reasons have to do with context: In literary context just before our focus passage of Scripture:

Jesus says, *“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.”* This sheep did not do anything against other sheep!

Then Peter came and said to him, *“Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”* Jesus said to him, *“Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times!”*

Greek in those days used conjunctions to indicate not only what we use conjunctions for in English, to connect thoughts together, but they also used them to mark the beginning or end or continuation of an idea, like paragraph markers. The word that is translated “then” in Peter’s question, *“If someone sins **against** me?”* indicates a new paragraph and new line of thought. Although the NRSVUE does not include it, our focus passage today began with a word that is often translated “yet,” and indicated a continuation of the preceding idea of “what if someone loses their way.”

So “Against you” does not fit, because Jesus is not yet addressing Peter’s question about sins against an individual. This passage, with its beginning with “yet,” belongs with the passage about the shepherd and the lost sheep. In other words, it is about losing one’s way like the lost sheep.

“Win over your brother or sister.” Give your neighbour a win!

In social context: Treating others as a sibling, a brother or sister, was a common middle eastern idea. Our Muslim neighbours refer to each other as brother or sister. In my last pastorate in Cornwall, I worked extensively with Muslims and adopted the practice, calling *them* brother or sister! If we treat others as a sibling, a family member, we might begin with a relationship rather than a judgment.

Another social context: *“Take two witnesses.”* This was a common Jewish idea at the time. And it prevents anyone assuming authority for the whole faith community.

Another linguistic context: *“Church”* The original Greek word meant not church, as we use the word, but any gathering that had some authoritative standing in the community. There were no churches yet. There were synagogues, but when a synagogue is intended in the New Testament, it is so named, or else its members are referred to as a congregation.

At the end of our focus lesson today, Jesus says, *“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”* The Greek word that is translated “gathered” is the root of the word *synagogue*. This makes it likely that at the end of the passage Jesus is talking about a gathering of disciples of the way of Jesus. They would gather in one another’s homes. But in this earlier part of our passage, by using the word for a gathering of authoritative standing in any community, Jesus is saying these principles, while very important for faith communities, can be applied to any gathering where followers of Jesus find themselves and want to be inclusive and compassionate, and invite diversity.

Another context: *Treating people who have lost their way, “like Gentiles.”* Jesus healed the Canaanite woman’s daughter, the Roman centurion’s servant, the deaf mute man in the Gentile territory of Decapolis. He healed the demon-possessed man in the Gentile territory of Gerasa. He spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well, and told the story of the good Samaritan.

Then there’s *“Treating people like tax collectors.”* One of his disciples, Matthew, was a tax collector. Jesus is recorded as having dinner with many tax collectors. One of them was a chief tax collector (and therefore probably a Gentile!): Zachaeus.

For Jesus, there were only two kinds of people: neighbours, who we are to love, and enemies, who we are also to love.

Another linguistic context: *“Binding/Losing on earth, in heaven.”* This actually uses the future perfect tense and should read: *“whatever you bind together on the earth will be what has been bound in heaven and whatever you loose on the earth*

will be what has been loosed in heaven." In other words, the verse is instructing us to do the work that is done in heaven. And the general message Jesus brought about heaven is welcoming, forgiveness, acceptance, and love. The same tense is used in the Prayer of Jesus and should read *"Thy will be done as it has been done in heaven."* Earth is to imitate heaven. We are to imitate God of heaven.

Another linguistic context: *two* agreeing. Does this mean that if two of us agree and pray about something, then the God of heaven necessarily complies?

This verse begins with another conjunction, "Again," indicating that it is a continuation of the preceding idea about binding and loosing. Both this verse and the previous one tell us that we are to try to make a win for those who are lost sheep, those who stray, those who lose their way. The "two witnesses" are to attempt to make happen with the one who has lost their way as what happens in heaven: welcoming, forgiveness, acceptance, and love. That is the agreement. In fact, the verb that gets translated "agree together" is a verb meaning the act of communal discernment in the redemptive reconciling process.

And the agreement is about anything. That Greek word translated "*anything*" is the same one from which we get our word *pragmatic*. So, again, these are pragmatic ideas for getting along and helping someone who has lost their way to have a win, to find their way.

What stands out in all of this is accountability. Part of love is holding one another accountable. This is not judging each other. It is not imposing our beliefs on each other. It is when what began this whole passage, before the words about finding a lost sheep, a long passage with concepts linked together with conjunctions. That beginning had Jesus saying:

"At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.' ⁵ Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

And then came the parable of the lost sheep, which ended with the words, *“So it is not the will of the Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.”* Jesus teaches us to approach God as our heavenly parent, and come to God as children, and treat one another as sisters and brothers.

Our passage today is about protecting one another — having boundaries of behaviour that protect us, God’s little children, from harm, and having accountability when boundaries are crossed. And that accountability is marked by *love your neighbour as yourself*, by wanting a win for the strayed neighbour. We don’t help anyone by being indulgent! Nor do we help by being judgmental. We all need accountability in order to be at our best.