Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm 149
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

Today in Matthew's gospel, Jesus talks about excommunication. Now you know why there was a guest preacher this morning. Jokes aside, we have a serious task before us.

Our text today from Matthew's gospel is from a discourse Jesus gives about how the freshly formed church should operate. Jesus knew there would be conflicts great and small in the young church. On the small scale, people would step on each other's toes maybe even without realizing it. They'd speak out of turn and need gentle help understanding how their words harmed another person. On the larger scale, people would occasionally have major moral failings that would require a full-scale intervention and course correction for the safety of others in the community. The disciples were human after all, so here is their guidebook for how to handle the inevitable conflict, mistake, or worse. Jesus put in place a failsafe legal system to prevent the community from dissolving into chaos when there is a problem.

It goes like this: If someone sins, confront them in private. If they don't repent, bring another person with you as a witness and try again. If that still didn't work, take them before the whole congregation. And if they won't listen even after a public intervention, they will lose their place in the community. That last option is worst case scenario, because that decision will be final. There's no going back from that, and Jesus makes that crystal clear. "Whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." In other words, Jesus says: "you have the power to interpret the law, and I will respect your decision."

I don't know if you feel this way, but Jesus has more faith in humanity than I do. Binding and loosing is no straightforward task. If you've ever been in the room when a conflict is being mediated, you know that it is rarely a clear-cut path. It's messy and complicated. There are people involved in that process, which means mistakes can and will be made. When I look at this failsafe system, frankly all I see is a massive margin of error. And believe me, in the history of the Christian church, there has been grave error.

Before we go any farther, here's a warning: our gospel text today has us on the cusp of a place we do not need to go. Where preserving the institution is more important than protecting individuals. Where morality moves at the whim of the majority. Where peace and unity depend on the erasure of difference. At face value, it seems that might be where this text is pointing us. Tread carefully, church. These are dangerous waters.

Much of my own work in ministry centers around a group known as the "exvangelicals." These are people who grew up in conservative evangelical spaces and for whatever reason left. Thanks be to God, many of them have found a safe and welcoming home in the Episcopal Church. I myself am one of them. As you might imagine, many of these individuals identify as LGBTQ. My point is this: Queer people know better than anyone what can go wrong when an institution improperly handles the task of binding and loosing. I've heard countless stories from people who were put under surveillance and policed by institutions because of their identity. That was my own experience at my Christian college in Alabama. Others were forced to go before their congregations and publicly confess. Yes, some were excommunicated from their churches and even their families. And for some, church-sponsored conversion therapy became a reality.

Traumas like these are part of that massive margin of error I'm talking about. I see it because I lived it along with too many others in the church. I commend to you Timothy Schraeder Rodriguez's new book *Conversion Therapy Dropout*, with all the standard trigger warnings of course. If any of this resonates with your own experience – hear me when I say this – that was not the Gospel. Full stop.

Yet we still have before us a system that appears to move at the wishes of the majority, whether that majority is aligned with God's will or not. There are holes in Jesus' failsafe guidebook for resolving conflicts in the community. Binding and loosing is dangerous, messy, and riddled with potential for error.

I need to teach Bible for a minute. Binding and loosing were common terms in Jesus' day to discuss how the Law was interpreted and applied in different circumstances. In fact, there were groups of Rabbis tasked with the work of binding and loosing. Think of them like our court system, whose work is to interpret the laws when things get fuzzy. When a legally ambiguous issue arose, it was brought before the council, who would determine whether a given law applied or not. When they determined that a given law applied in the scenario, it was called "binding." When the law did not apply, it was called "loosing." This sort of thing happened all the time.[1]

Jesus did his own binding and loosing from time to time. He was a Rabbi, after all. Remember when the rich young ruler came to Jesus and asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life?

[1] The work of Rudy Baergen was indispensable here. See "'Binding and Loosing' in Matthew 18:18 and the Mennonite Church Canada 2016 Decision on Sexuality" in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2018), 4-23.

This is the next chapter over from where we are today in Matthew. Jesus said: "keep the commandments." The wealthy young man says: "I have kept all of these." But Jesus says, "go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor." Binding. You're not off the hook. There's another rule that applies here.[2]

Elsewhere, in Mark 2, the disciples pick grain on the sabbath. This went against the Law, and the Pharisees caught them for it. But Jesus said to them plainly: "the Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath." Loosing. The Sabbath matters, but nutrition and sustenance are more fundamental. The Sabbath rule does not apply in this scenario.

This is the Law at work. Binding and loosing was how the system was designed to function. There's room for argument. There's space to talk it out. Jesus said in Matthew 5 that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Binding and loosing does not invalidate the law and it does not replace it, but it does clarify it. Jesus handed the task of clarifying to us. The duty of interpreting and reinterpreting the Law for our own time belongs to us. It is entrusted to us. To all of us. Together. With Jesus.

Our text today ends with a famous line from Jesus: "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." This verse is typically heard out of its context, where it is taken to mean the presence of Jesus among a group of worshippers. But within its context, its meaning is quite different. The context is not worship, but reconciliation. This is a promise from Jesus to be present in our deliberations, when we gather to hash it out. Jesus promised to be present

[2] Matthew 19:16-30.

whenever we gather together to faithfully discern the bindings and loosings of the law in our own context.

Here, my siblings in Christ, is the only circumstance under which the failsafe system can actually work: when Jesus Christ is put in the center. I told you earlier that I saw in this system was potential for a massive margin of error. That's because, left up to humans alone, errors of judgement will abound, some of them catastrophic. But binding and loosing is not merely a human effort. It sits on the shoulders of our just and righteous Lord, who summed up all the law and the prophets by saying: "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." If we heed his commands and follow his example, I believe our bindings and loosings will, by God's grace alone, lead to a fairer, freer, more just world.

"To the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority before all time and now and forever. Amen" (Jude 25).