

**Matthew 18:15-20**  
***“An Impossibly Easy Church to Join”***

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This sermon is called, “An Impossibly Easy Church to Join.” Given how easy we have made it to get into the church today, it might sound like a strange and dramatic sermon title. “An Impossibly Easy Church to Join.” When all we have to do nowadays to get into church is sit in front of our TV or computer screen and click on a YouTube link, while making sure we’ve at least brushed our hair and put on a clean shirt, how much easier can we make it to join the church? I mean, the most impossible thing we had to do this morning was show up at a specific time, and not just at any time. I will say that one of the blessings of being able to join church online every week is that we’ve removed the idea that church is what happens only at a certain hour of the day. Now it can happen at every hour of the day. Except today; today it’s happening now.

Of course, you and I know that despite how easy we’ve made it today and every Sunday to join the church, there are still some who just couldn’t make it today. Maybe they just didn’t want to put on pants. They said, “No one’s going to see below my waist.” Their wife said, “You still have to put on pants.” Or maybe, like other Sundays when we gather at a specific time, they just had to be somewhere else at this time. At work, visiting with mom at the nursing home, cheering from the sidelines of a soccer game. Of course, you and I know there are also some who didn’t get on to join us today even though they could have gotten on to join us today. And why? It’s not for the reasons we might think. It’s not because some people just can’t accept the idea of an online gathering as being church. I’ve tried to convince us of this before, that what the church suffers from really is not a lack of walls but a lack of imagination. But the truth is, it’s not that simple. And I confess, I have been a bit harsh in my evaluation at times. I too miss our walls, and our shared pews. I miss our children all scampering to the front of our sanctuary. I miss what happens when one person tells another person, while the two are standing around in the Fellowship Hall after worship eating store bought cookies, and one person says, “I lost someone I love this week,” and no words can comfort them, so the other person just pulls them in for a hug. I miss that. When I’m feeling really desperate, I even miss the sound of us singing the Gloria Patri. Yes, the truth is, despite how easy we have made it to join the church today, there are

some who couldn't make it to today because, no matter how nice it is to see your smiling faces on the screen, it's an awful reminder of the great distance that still keeps us from pulling each other in for a hug.

If you ask me which church season I like the most, I will tell you, Advent and Christmas. Together they celebrate the incarnation of God in Christ. During Advent we wait on the promise, and at Christmas we celebrate its fulfillment. A Jesus who says I'm coming for you, and then does. Pulls us in to give us a hug, and lets us hug him in return. How beautiful is that. Joy to the world. You can just feel it.

And yet, I will also tell you that right now, what comforts me most is not Advent and Christmas, but Good Friday. A Jesus who knows the pain of distance and separation, who cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In his book, "The Cross and the Lynching Tree," James Cone reminds us that it is this Jesus who has been sung throughout history as the God of the black community. Not the God who comes into our world like he's so happy to be here, but the God who comes as a slave—bought, sold, whipped, rejected, separated from his mother, his family, his friends, and hung upon a cross like one lynched upon a tree.

Please don't hear me wrong. I am not saying that our experience of church these days—insofar as we are separated and distanced—can somehow or another be likened to the experience of Jesus, or George Floyd, or Jacob Blake, or Trayvon Martin, or the estimated 1.2 million slaves who were bought and sold here in America in a span of 100 years<sup>1</sup>. To say that would be to commit an injustice as gross as the cross and slavery itself. What I do hope you hear me saying, though, is that we have an opportunity on our hands today, an opportunity to see in the experience of others something about ourselves and who we are as a church. Because for as easy as we have made it look to join the church this morning, we might be surprised to discover that we have also made it impossible.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/02/12/magazine/1619-project-slave-auction-sites.html>

To do this, we're going to look at 5 short verses in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 18:15-20:

*"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. 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, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 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. 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."*

You know what I love about these instructions from Jesus? They're not complicated. It amazes me how much we have managed to complicate what Jesus said. Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." A lawyer stands up and says, "Yes, but who is my neighbor?" A rich man wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him, "You know all the commandments." The rich man replies, "Yes, but can you give me something more to do?" The disciples want to see God. Jesus pours some water in a bowl, hands them a towel, and kicks off his sandals to reveal his dirty feet, and the disciples say, "What else can you show us?"

If the Bible were an instruction manual and Jesus our instructor, he would tell us, "Don't complicate the simple." Or put another way, don't make impossible what should be easy. So here in Matthew's gospel, Jesus lays it out for us simple and easy. Step 1: "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault in private." Translation: Church isn't a place for us to air out our dirty laundry. It's also not a place to pretend like you don't have any, because reality check, everyone does. So be honest and don't embarrass one another. Step 2: If the member listens to you, accept their apology and move on. No one says you have to forget about it, just don't keep bringing it up. Step 3: If

the member won't hear what you have to say, take one or two other people with you. Right or wrong, everyone deserves to be heard, everyone deserves to be validated. This goes for both the offended and the offending. Step 4: if the truth of what a person has done is now clear to three or four people, and the offender still refuses to apologize and make it right, tell it to the church. If that doesn't work, Step 5: treat them like you would a tax collector or a Gentile. Cut them loose, but still keep a seat open for them at the table. Even absent family members are still family members.

It's instruction so easy and simple that it turns out to be the only recorded instruction Jesus ever gave to the church. Be a community that is unafraid to confront sin and everything that would separate us from the love of God and one another. When you're wrong, admit it out loud. When you're right, be humble quietly. When necessary, let each other go their own way, but always leave a seat open at the table.

And yet, if it's so easy, why do we make it so impossibly hard? I think part of the reason is because we have confused being gracious with being right, we have confused being compassionate with being right, and we have confused being political with being wrong. Few figures in history were more political than Jesus, because few people cared more about the ways we order our society and set up our systems either to create unity or division. Jesus cared about the ways disease, sickness, and poor access to healthcare left people on the fringes. He was deeply concerned about our use of power in the public square to silence the already poor and marginalized, and he wasn't afraid to take his cross all the way to the steps of Rome to get in a discussion with Pilate about what truth is. Jesus was political. He just wasn't a politician. He was a non-partisan humanitarian who understood that being gracious and compassionate doesn't mean we give endless chances, or that we have no moral compass and accept everything as equal. It does mean, however, that we ourselves admit to the things we have gotten wrong.

One of my preaching idols is the late Fred Craddock who tells the following story.

[When I was young], my mother took us to church and Sunday School; my father didn't go. He complained about Sunday dinner being late when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, "I know what the church wants. Church doesn't care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge. Right?" Isn't that the name of it? Another name, another pledge." That's what he always said.

Sometimes we'd have a revival. Pastor would bring an evangelist and say to the evangelist, "There's one now, sic him, get him, get him," and my father would say the same thing. Every time, my mother in the kitchen, always nervous, in fear of flaring tempers, of somebody being hurt. And always my father said, "The church doesn't care about me. The church wants another name and another pledge." I guess I heard it about a thousand times.

One time he didn't say it. He was in the veteran's hospital, and he was down to seventy-three pounds. They'd taken out his throat, and said, "It's too late." They put in a metal tube, and X rays burned him to pieces. I flew in to see him. He couldn't speak, couldn't eat. I looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed. And even that tray where they put food, if you can eat, on that was a flower. And all the flowers beside the bed, every card, every blossom, were from persons or groups from the church.

He saw me read a card. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written this line, I would not tell you this story. He wrote: "In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story."

I said, "What's your story, Daddy?"

And he wrote, "I was wrong."<sup>2</sup>

Mark my words, it is the easiest and most impossible thing to do if you want to join the church, to say I was wrong. But if it really is the church, say it, and this is what you'll hear someone say in return, "Well, come on in. You're in good company. We've still got plenty of seats open at the table."

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<sup>2</sup> Craddock, Fred B. (2001). "Craddock Stories." Edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward; Missouri: Chalice Press; p. 14.