

September 10, Ordinary 23A (Matt. 18:15–20)

At a #decolonizeLutheranism forum, I thought of Matthew 18.

by [Amy Zietlow](#) in the [August 16, 2017](#) issue

In Matthew 18, Jesus describes a step-by-step process that guides the church in the holy work of reconciliation. Step one: point out, in private, the fault of the one who has sinned against you. If that doesn't lead to repentance and change, move to step two: bring two or three witnesses so that the words you speak can be confirmed. If the lost member persists in refusing to listen, bring it to the body of Christ. Speak and the body will listen.

Finally, if these steps fail, return to the preparatory work of hospitality and approach the lost one as an outsider to the community before repeating the three-step process. Creative means may be demanded, because the body of Christ longs for no one to be lost.

I was reminded of Christ's call to the work of reconciliation as I sat on the floor at the #decolonizeLutheranism forum held as part of our 2017 Central/Southern Illinois Synod Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. There weren't enough chairs for those who gathered for the forum. I marveled at the crowd.

Maggie Falenschek, the forum's coleader, flipped through a colorful presentation highlighting the roots of this one-year-old reformation movement within the ELCA. #DecolonizeLutheranism began as a grieving response to Dylann Roof, a member of an ELCA congregation, who killed members of Emanuel AME Church during a prayer meeting. It was also a meme-creating reaction to a "You may be a Lutheran if . . ." campaign that presupposed that Lutheranism is limited to people who look like me: blond, blue-eyed, Germanic/Scandinavian heritage, Garrison Keillor fan, Jello salad aficionado.

Accomplices in the #decolonizeLutheranism movement sound a clarion call to the body of Christ to "lift every voice and sing." As I sat in the crowded convention

center room, marveling at the earnest desire expressed by those gathered, most of whom look like me, to lose ourselves for the sake of those members of our body who are suffering, I thought of Matthew 18 and Jesus' marching orders for being the reconciling body of Christ.

I confess that in my reading, studying, and preaching on Matthew 18, I have tended to identify as the reconciler: as the person who is sinned against, who is working to bring others—those people, whoever they may be—into the fold.

#DecolonizeLutheranism invites me to see that I *am* those people. I am estranged, and my brothers and sisters in Christ, inspired by grace, are trying to keep me connected. For Christ's sake, they will not leave me—even though, in ignorance, I have strayed from them.

From my place on the carpet in that convention center, I realized that we were already past Jesus' first step in reconciliation. Jesus begins in verse 15 by laying out what I find to be the most most effective way to enact change in behavior and character: one-on-one conversation. However, based on the number of witnesses in that convention center room, we have already moved to step two, even three. I wondered if I had already been deaf to the one-on-one pleading for repentance from individuals in my life who have been treated as less than human in our church. I can't ignore these witnesses. I can't ignore the church.

If I do, in time, I may be treated as a gentile and a tax collector. Based on Jesus' example, that must mean that I will find myself invited to dinner, called down from a sycamore tree like Zacchaeus, or even asked to follow, like Matthew. Those inviting me may be challenged, as Jesus was, for their insistence that I not be lost—for graciously believing that I, too, am a sister in Christ. They may suffer for not writing me off.

Theologian Linda Thomas edits the blog We Talk. We Listen. She featured a piece by #decolonizeLutheranism networker Tuhina Rasche. Rasche writes of talking to groups across the country and realizing that she is far less a mobilizer for change than a grief counselor for an expression of the church that is dying. She writes:

I find myself sitting with people in the valley of the shadow of death. I move with many people through the stages of grief because the church as it once was . . . is changing. As much as many of us claim that we welcome change, change makes us uneasy, uncomfortable, and unsettled. Change

brings about the death of what once was.

The one who is lost will grieve the turning away from the sinfulness to which he or she has been wedded. The ones who confront us with our sin are doing so in love, trusting that we want to be reconciled for the sake of Christ.

Thomas once wrote in a piece on womanist theology that “what the mind forgets, the body remembers.” The first mark of the church is to be one. Christ calls us to the holy work of re-membering one another through the steps of reconciliation. We are a re-membering people. Our minds may forget, but the body of Christ will re-member. We are most like Jesus when we listen and speak in love and truth.

Reconciliation is body talk. Listen, the body is speaking.