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Family of God

Matthew 18:18

In the 18th chapter of Matthew the gospel writer is addressing a church that is struggling with the issue of identity. It is a fledgling community trying to survive in a dangerous world. Patterns of leadership and decision making were not yet well defined resulting in unresolved conflict. Some members were concluding that the challenge was too great and they were giving up. Matthew's gospel reminds the church that it is a family where we learn to see ourselves through a different kind of lens.

Russell Siler Jones has described the transformative process which is at the heart of the church. He has written about his boyhood experience of learning to play baseball from an unusually gifted coach named Don Crosby. It was early in the season and some of the boys had just quit the team. This created a major crisis because one of those who left the team was the catcher. He described what happened next in these words:

I wondered what we were going to do without a catcher, and at our next practice I found out. I was the right fielder, right field being where Little League coaches everywhere play their weakest fielder. Don came over to me, put his arm on my shoulder and looked me in the eye. "Russell," he said, "I've been watching the way you throw the ball from right field. Son," he paused, "you throw like a catcher."

I had tried catching before. I couldn't do it. I was what was called "bat blind." Being bat blind means that when the batter swings, you blink your eyes and the ball hits you in the chest or the face. Most people are bat blind, since it is rather natural to close your eyes and flinch when someone swings a 32-inch piece of lumber in front of your face.

Don helped me put on the catching gear: first the shin guards, then the chest protector, finally the mask. He sent our pitcher Lamar Mackey to the mound and had him throw me a few. Then Don stepped to the plate with a bat. Lamar threw his next pitch. Don swung, and I did not blink. I caught the ball. I was a catcher (*Christian Century*, July 1, 2008, page 13).

The coach made it possible for Jones to see himself in a new way. This new way of seeing changed his approach to baseball and gave him a new perspective on life. It was a lesson he would never forget.

Matthew wants the early church to understand that they are engaged in a similar process. God is at work in their family to transform their understanding of who they are and what they can be. This process means that they are connected to God and one another in ways that are far stronger than they can imagine. That's what Matthew means when he writes: "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven (Matthew 18:18)." We are part of a family that is rooted in eternity.

This is the insight which is conveyed in the 12th chapter of Exodus. Here we find the story of a people who come to see themselves in a new way. The Hebrew slaves are given a new way to understand their role in life as they begin their journey to the Promised Land. The defining moment comes when the blood of the lamb is smeared on the lintels and doorposts of their houses. This identifies them as God's family who will be spared the plague visited on the Egyptians. This new self

awareness will equip them for the challenges of their long wilderness journey. They know that God has led them out of Egypt and transformed their lives. They are bound to God's eternal purposes.

The people who wrote a new mission statement for this church in 1908 understood this truth. For 71 years their ministry had been centered on their downtown site at 4th and Monroe. Then for almost two years they functioned without a building. Many people thought the difficulty of being a homeless church for such a long time would cause the congregation to splinter apart.

When Adelbert Higley arrived in late 1906, he officiated his first service with this exile congregation which took place in the afternoon at First Presbyterian Church. He was amazed that there were 400 worshipers there to greet him. They had learned that they were bound together by something far more important than a building.

They understood that they were part of a family that was rooted in eternity to worship God and serve others. They already knew that they were in the world for ministry.