

Semicontinuous
Exod. 12:1–14
Ps. 149

Complementary
Ezek. 33:7–11
Ps. 119:33–40
Rom. 13:8–14
Matt. 18:15–20

Call to Reconcile

Goal for the Session *Children will hear Jesus' call to reconciliation and demonstrate ways of reconciling.*

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 18:15–20

WHAT is important to know?

—From “Exegetical Perspective” by Mitchell G. Reddish

Matthew 18:15–20 has parallels with 16:13–20. Both passages use the word “church” (*ekklesia*)—the only two places the term appears in the Gospels—and both passages speak of binding and loosing. Even though this passage is primarily concerned with matters of church discipline, its focus is on reconciliation, not punishment. The ultimate goal is to “regain the brother” (v. 15). Familial language is used. The final saying in verse 20 is a reminder to the community that the risen Christ is present in and with the church, even when the church must deal with disciplinary issues. This reminder serves as a word of assurance and as a precaution.

WHERE is God in these words?

—From “Theological Perspective” by Charles Hambrick-Stowe

Jesus speaks here not of honest differences of opinion but of a fellow Christian who “sins against you.” Such sin would include the offenses summarized in the Ten Commandments, but one might extrapolate it to mean any self-serving behavior that breaks the unity of fellowship in Christ. When church members injure one another, it is not merely an individual personal offense: it is a theological matter, harming the body of Christ. Each step outlined by Jesus is to be undertaken in the hope of healing and restoration. Jesus could mean this: if we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it?

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

—From “Pastoral Perspective” by Jin S. Kim

The ministry of reconciliation must be at the heart of any Christian community’s mission. The church has not been given the power to “bind” and to “loose” (v. 18) because it is always right, but because its primary language is one of confession, restoration, and reconciliation when offenses and divisions occur. This requires leadership that confesses in real time before the community, seeking collective accountability and correction as it returns the favor to the church body. There will be conflict, but it is precisely through conflict that we model for the world how to bind and loose one another appropriately.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

—From “Homiletical Perspective” by Dale P. Andrews

Care and responsibility to forgive, to seek out reconciliation with the offender, are sustained in the authority given to the church. Power to bind and loose belongs not simply to the church leader or to the universal church (as demonstrated through Peter in Matt. 16:13–20), but also to the local church (18:18–20). This discipline teaches a theology of care by illumining the manner of care. The authority to interpret how to apply the rules of care, even the law, is given to the church. We seek to care for one another even when injured or offended, which requires discipline in binding and loosing ourselves to repent and to forgive, all sustained in Christ.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 18:15–20

Focus on Your Teaching

Children this age are learning to relate to other children in a group setting. They are increasing in their ability to feel empathy. However, they will experience ruptures in relationships and need help in learning how to reconcile with others. As this new church school year begins, take time to help learners get acquainted with one another and with your learning area. This will help learners to experience your class as a place of welcome, belonging, and friendship.

Gracious God, help me prepare to begin this church school year. Give me the ability to listen carefully to what the children say and to be encouraging to those who seem hesitant to join in the activities. In Christ's name. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- small table or large box
- green cloth
- battery-powered candle
- plain paper
- pencils
- crayons
- push pins or masking tape
- fine-tipped permanent marker
- Bible
- Color Pack 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- scissors
- tape

For Responding

- option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 2, crayons or colored pencils
- option 2: small boxes or blocks, drinking straws, tape, puppets from Resource Sheet 1
- option 3: Color Pack 2, game markers or buttons, die

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, make a simple welcome sign and display it with Color Pack 1. Make a sign that says “Our Class” and put it on a wall or bulletin board. Set up a worship center by covering a small table or large box with green cloth and placing a Bible open to Matthew 18 and a battery-powered candle on it. Fold sheets of plain paper in half, one per child. Cut the strip with the finger puppets from the copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Reconcile).

As the children arrive, use a fine-tipped permanent marker to write his or her first name and birth date (for example, “Carol 18”) in the month of his or her birthday on Color Pack 1. While waiting for all to arrive, ask each learner to write his or her name on a folded piece of paper and then draw a picture of his or her family (including pets) on one half and things he or she enjoys doing on the other half. Welcome each child by name as you add his or her drawing to the “Our Class” display.

Gather the children around the worship center. Light the candle, saying it is a reminder that Jesus’ love is with all of us in Sunday school. Pray aloud, inviting learners to repeat each phrase:

Dear God, / we are glad to be at church today. / Thank you for being with us. / Help us to learn new things / about you and your Son, Jesus. / Amen.

Sit with learners in a circle and invite them to recall times they told a teacher or parent about a disagreement with a brother, sister, friend, or classmate, and then were told: “Go work it out yourselves.” Follow up each story by asking: Were you able to “make up” with the other person?

Even if you know the children in your class well, an introductory activity like these pictures may help you learn new things about them. It also helps the children to learn more about each other.

The word *reconcile* will be new to most learners. Children this age enjoy learning a “big word” when it is used enough to help them understand its meaning.

¹⁵ “If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together. If they listen to you, then you’ve won over your brother or sister. ¹⁷ But if they still won’t pay attention, report it to the church.
—Matthew 18:15, 17, CEB

EXPLORING

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Reconcile). Invite the children to describe what they see happening in the pictures. Ask them to describe the differences between the two pictures. Wonder together about what might have happened after the first scene and before the second. Call the learners’ attention to the word *reconcile*. Ask them to use a finger to trace the letters as the group spells and pronounces the word together. Explain that reconcile means to be friends again and to live in peace. Offer a mental picture by describing reconciling as building a bridge to connect with another person after you’ve had an argument or disagreement.

Turn in your Bible to Matthew 18:15. Tell the children that this is where Jesus teaches what to do when we have a disagreement with someone—how to reconcile. When Jesus talks about this, he calls his followers brothers and sisters. Read aloud Matthew 18:15, 17 from the sidebar. Discuss:

- ✪ What is the first thing Jesus says people should do to reconcile?
- ✪ What does Jesus say to do if the first step doesn’t work?
- ✪ When might you need to tell an adult about a disagreement?

Distribute the finger puppets from Resource Sheet 1. Have the children color the puppets and cut them out. Help them tape the tabs to fit a puppet on each index finger. Have the children use their puppets to act out Jesus’ words as you read aloud verse 15. Ask:

- ✪ How can Jesus’ teaching help you to work out your disagreements?

Invite them to use their finger puppets to act out how they might do this.

Review the story by singing the following words to the tune “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” having the children sing each line after you:

Mad, mad, mad at you.
Talking we should do.
Jesus says reconcile, reconcile, reconcile.
We’ll feel better too.

Repeat the song several times until children can sing it easily.

RESPONDING

Mark the activities you will use:

1. **Hidden Word Puzzle** Children will grow in understanding Jesus’ teaching as they complete the puzzle and discuss ways to reconcile. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Hidden Word Puzzle) and crayons or colored pencils. Call attention to the color key. Ask learners to color the puzzle according to the code to discover a hidden word. As they work, invite them to tell about times they have observed children getting into arguments at school. How did things work out? When they have completed their coloring, have them identify the word *reconcile*. Review the meaning of the word and

EASY
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invite learners to describe how following Jesus' teaching might make a difference in what they do when they have a disagreement with someone at school.

- 2. Build a Bridge** Learners will role-play a way to reconcile, using a bridge they construct. Form pairs. Tell the pairs to construct a bridge by laying drinking straws between two small boxes or wooden blocks. (To make the bridge sturdy, they can tape the straws together.) When bridges are complete, have pairs stand one finger puppet from Resource Sheet 1 (Reconcile) at each end of the bridge. Tell them to pretend these two puppets had an argument on the playground. Have pairs plan how their puppets will reconcile and then act this out for the rest of the group. Affirm portrayals of reconciling in different ways, such as: meeting at the middle of the bridge, phoning each other, one crossing the bridge to talk to the other, saying reconciling words, hugging, shaking hands.
- 3. Reconciliation Journey** As they play a game, learners will demonstrate ways to reconcile. Place Color Pack 2 on a table or the floor. Form pairs and give each pair a game marker or button to place at the start block. Have pairs take turns rolling the die and advancing that number of squares. When a pair lands on a square with a situation written on it, read it aloud for the group. If the pair can act out a way to reconcile in that situation, it moves ahead two spaces. If the pair cannot act out a way to reconcile, it moves back one square. Play until all players reach the finish.

Try to notice which activities each child enjoys most. This observation will help in future planning. If you work with a team of teachers, invite them to do the same and then discuss your observations.

CLOSING

Summarize that Jesus teaches us how to work things out with other people, how to reconcile. It's not always easy to do this! First we need to tell the other person why what she or he is doing is not OK with us. If that doesn't work, we can get help to work it out. Sing the reconcile song from Exploring.

Explain that in the closing prayer, learners will respond "O God, help us reconcile" when you point to them. Pray aloud:

When we hurt a friend,

O God, help us reconcile.

When we are angry with a brother or sister or cousin,

O God, help us reconcile.

When we don't like someone because of what he or she did,

O God, help us reconcile.

When we are mad at our parents or teachers,

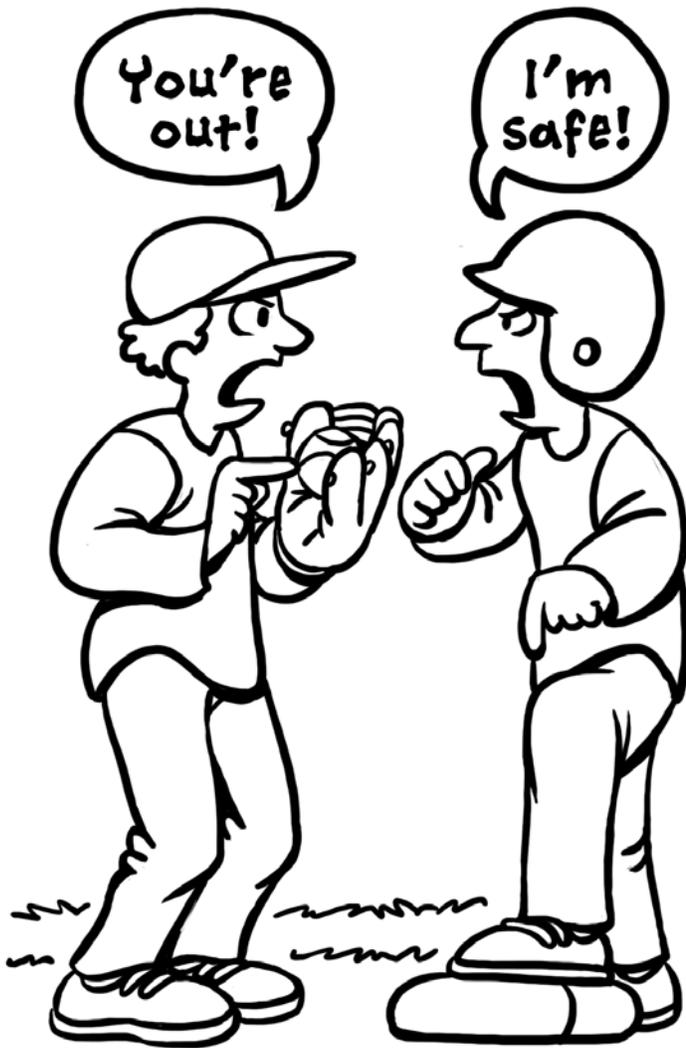
O God, help us reconcile. Amen.

Go around the circle, blessing each child: "(Name), God loves you."

September 6, 2020
Call to Reconcile

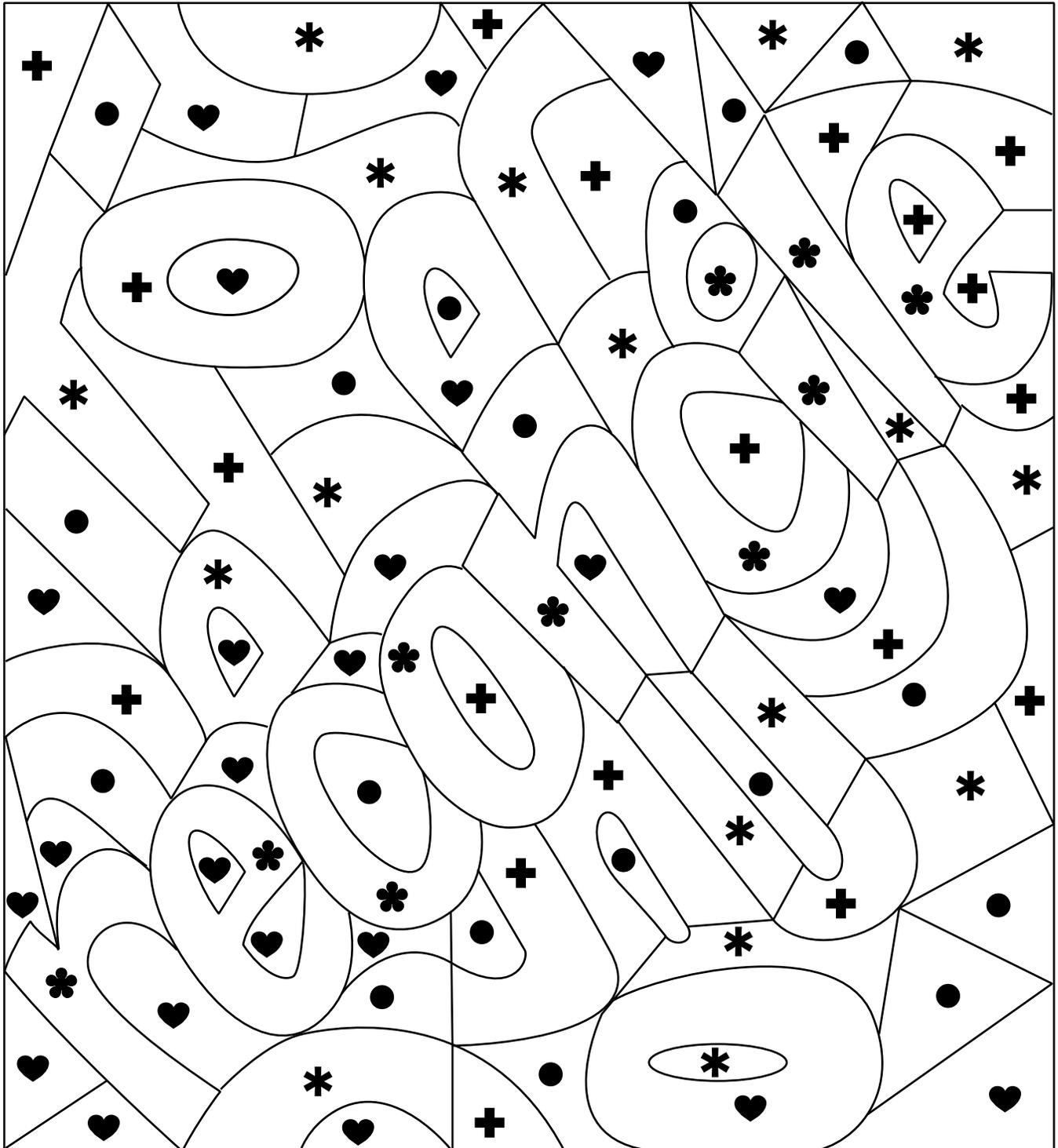
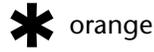
Grades (K) 1–2
Resource Sheet 1

Reconcile



Hidden Word Puzzle

Color Key:



Semicontinuous
Exod. 12:1–14
Ps. 149
Complementary
Ezek. 33:7–11
Ps. 119:33–40
Rom. 13:8–14
Matt. 18:15–20

Keeping Peace

Goal for the Session

Children will hear Jesus' teachings about handling conflict and plan ways to make peace with others.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 18:15–20

WHAT is important to know?

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FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 18:15–20

Focus on Your Teaching

As children play or work together, it is natural for them to disagree. Their squabbles and fights provide opportunities for them to learn how to resolve conflict. If they always give in to the other person, they never learn how to negotiate a solution that benefits both parties. If they always have their way, they may not develop empathy for the other's point of view. Rather than tell them to stop bickering, help children work out their differences. Jesus' words in Matthew 18:15–20 provide a basis for children to sort out their disagreements.

Loving God, stand with me as I use Jesus' words to sort out my disagreements and help me be a model for the children in my group. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- green cloth
- votive candle and matches or battery-operated candle
- Bible
- offering basket
- name tags (optional)
- poster board
- newsprint
- markers
- Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021; CD player
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- crayons
- Resource Sheet 1
- Color Pack 1, 2
- pastel construction paper

For Responding

- option 1: Resource Sheet 3, newsprint or poster board, marker
- option 2: Bible
- option 3: craft foam, fine-tipped permanent markers, embroidery thread, scissors
- option 4: *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021; CD player; Color Pack 2

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, print the opening lines from Gathering on poster board, and save to use in future weeks. Print response for Closing on newsprint. If you and the children do not know each other, provide name tags. For option 3 in Responding, cut 1" x 3" strips of craft foam and punch a hole at each end.

As the children arrive, play "The Whole World Is in God's Hands" (track 19 on *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021). Invite them to help set up the worship table with the green cloth, candle, Bible, and offering basket. When everyone is present, explain that the green cloth indicates that the church is in Common Time or Ordinary Time. In this case, it is the weeks after Pentecost until Advent.

Light the candle, and lead the following:

Leader: *During these weeks, we gather to praise God and study God's Word.*

Children: *We want to be faithful followers of God's Word and of Jesus.*

Everyone: *Loving God, thank you for our group and our church. May your Spirit show us the way. Amen.*

Receive the offering. Extinguish the candle.

To introduce the theme, ask:

✿ What happens when you and a friend get into an argument?

After the children have offered some thoughts, explain that Jesus knew arguments happened and taught his followers how to handle them.

If you don't know the children or there are new children, include a get-acquainted game, such as having each person say her or his first name and something she or he likes that begins with the initial ("My name is Michelle and I like mangos").

EXPLORING

To introduce an important word in the Bible story, give each child a copy of Resource Sheet 2 (Hidden Word Puzzle). Provide the colors of crayons in the key for every two or three children. When they have completed the page, read the word that was revealed. Ask:

✿ What does *reconcile* mean?

After some children have answered, ask a child to retrieve the Bible from the worship table and open it to the Gospel of Matthew. (If helpful, place a marker at Matthew 1.) Explain that most of the Bible stories during these weeks of Common Time will come from Matthew. Ask:

✿ Who will be in the stories from Matthew?

After the children have named Jesus and other disciples, ask:

✿ What other books of the Bible tell stories about Jesus?

Recall that the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are the source of what we know about Jesus. Ask the child to turn to Matthew, chapter 18, and hold the Bible open while you tell the story on Resource Sheet 1 (Steps for Keeping Peace). Ask another child to hold Color Pack 1. Explain that in today's Bible story, Jesus is talking to his disciples. Recall the word found on Resource Sheet 2 (Hidden Word Puzzle) and suggest that they listen for it in the Bible story. After the story, ask:

✿ Based on Jesus' words, what do you think *reconcile* means?

Begin a class dictionary. Print *reconcile* on a sheet of pastel construction paper. Around the word, print the definition developed by the group and any synonyms they named. Display it where it will be seen in future sessions. Ask:

✿ What did Jesus say that would help people reconcile?

RESPONDING

If possible, offer at least two options so the children have a choice. One might be more challenging to interest children who can work on their own.

1. Group Agreement The beginning of a church school year and Matthew 18:15–20 are a good combination for the children to think about how they will work and learn together. Introduce this option by explaining that Jesus' words in Matthew 18:15–20 remind us that there are good and not so good ways to work and learn together. Follow the steps on Resource Sheet 3 (Group Agreement) to lead the group in this process. If you are unable to leave the agreement posted in the learning space, save it to display each week.

2. Contemporary Skit Placing the steps to reconciliation presented by Jesus in a contemporary context will help the children understand how to use them.

✿ Read Matthew 18:15. Set forth this situation: Charlie has a marker and Camille takes it.

✿ Read Matthew 18:16. Camille would not listen to Charlie. Now what is Charlie to do? Talk together about who the people might be. Invite three or four children to act out what Jesus says to do.

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Be clear with the children that they may seek help and advice from a trusted adult when the situation is more than they can handle.

The Whole World Is in God's Hands

*The whole world is in God's hands,
 The whole wide world is in God's hands,
 The whole world is in God's hands,
 The world is in God's hands.*

The wind and the wave are in God's hands . . .

The fish and the bird are in God's hands . . .

All of the animals are in God's hands . . .

All the world's people are in God's hands . . .

You and me are in God's hands . . .

- ✿ Read Matthew 18:17. Camille pays no attention to the friends Charlie brought with him. Now what is Charlie to do? Invite all to act out what Charlie should do now.
- ✿ Read Matthew 18:17. Camille still won't cooperate. Now what is Charlie and the church to do?

Talk with the group about times when they find themselves in similar situations.

3. **Bracelet** To help children remember Jesus' words about reconciliation, they will make bracelets they can wear or carry with them. Give each child a strip of foam craft and a permanent fine-tipped marker. Have them print *reconcile* on the strip. Help them thread several strands of embroidery thread through the holes and tie it to their wrists. When all are ready, talk about when they might need to remember to find ways to reconcile with someone.
4. **Song** When children feel unsure that they can handle a difficult situation, "The Whole World Is in God's Hands" (track 19 on *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021) can be a reminder that God is in charge. Invite the group to listen to the song. Ask:
 - ✿ What is the good news in this song?

Show Color Pack 2. Ask:

- ✿ How does this picture remind you of this song?
- ✿ What does it mean to be "in God's hands"?

Sing the song together, feeding the group the new line for each stanza. Explain that this song will begin each session during weeks during Common Time and can be a reminder for them that God loves them and cares for them.

CLOSING

Play "Let Us Love One Another" (track 16 on *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021) as the children gather at the worship table. Light the candle.

Read the response for the litany from the newsprint together (*God, help us reconcile*). Lead the children in the litany, cueing them for the response:

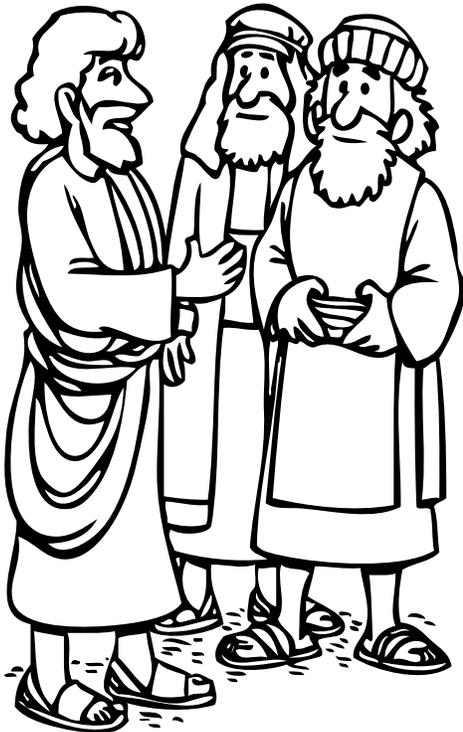
When we hurt a friend, Response
When we are angry with a brother or sister or friend, Response
When we don't like someone because of what she or he said or did, Response
When we are upset with a parent or teacher, Response
Amen.

As the children leave, say to each one: "(Name), God loves you. Show God's love to others this week."

Steps for Keeping Peace based on Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus often taught large crowds of people, but sometimes he taught only the disciples when they were alone. Many of those teachings are collected in the Gospel of Matthew. Perhaps he taught his closest friends as they walked along the countryside. Or maybe he told them these things when they rested under a tree.

On this day, Jesus talked with the disciples about what to do when someone treats you badly or unfairly, how to be reconciled. Jesus said to them:



If your friend hurts you in some way like saying mean things about you, go to this person when you are alone, just the two of you. Explain that what the person said or did was wrong and hurt you.

But if the person won't listen to you, leave. Ask one or two friends to go with you to talk to the person who treated you unfairly. Then you have people who can tell others what you said and did.

If the person who treated you unfairly still pays no attention to you, report what is going on to the church. If the person who treated you badly won't even pay attention to the church, have nothing to do with this person because this one is no friend to you.

Remember that when two or three of my friends are together, I am there with them.

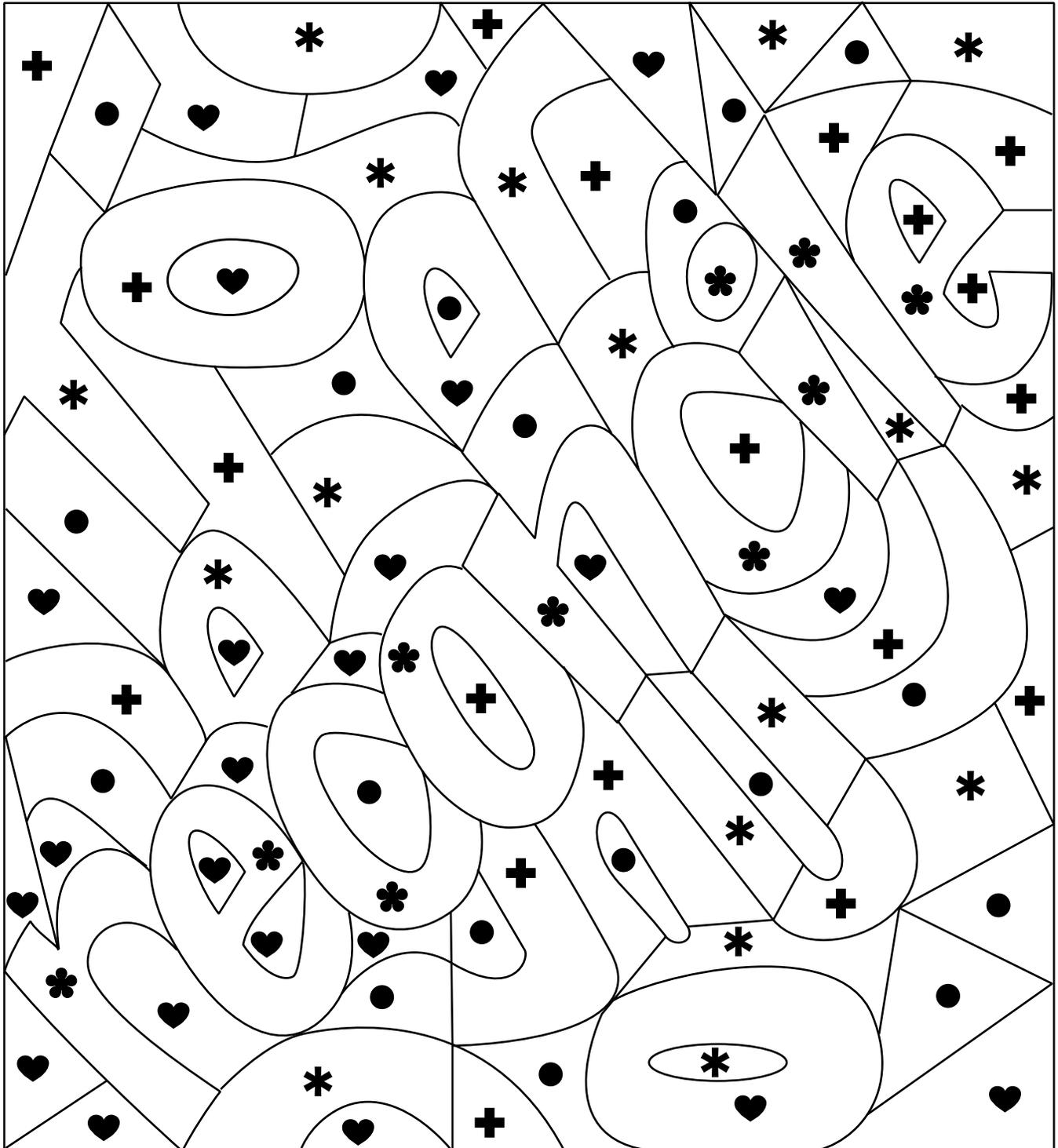
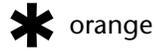
Surely the disciples thought about Jesus' words as they walked from town to town.

September 6, 2020
Keeping Peace

Multi-Age
Resource Sheet 2

Hidden Word Puzzle

Color Key:

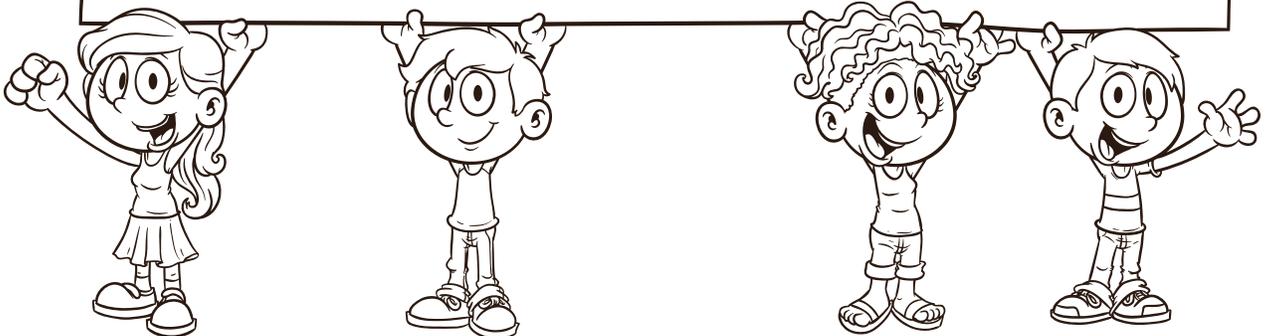


Group Agreement

Creating an agreement will benefit your group in two ways. It will: 1) provide an opportunity to talk about how their Sunday school class will act as a community of Jesus' followers; 2) give ownership of the group to the children—when learners help to create the guidelines for the group's behavior, they are more likely to follow them.

To create a group agreement with learners:

1. Begin by asking the children to tell about some of the rules they have at school or at home. Ask: Which of those rules might be helpful for our Sunday school class? What other rules or guidelines might help our group work well together?
2. Ask the children to name the kinds of positive behavior they think are important for your group. You may want to start with an opening phrase such as: "As Jesus' followers we will work together to . . ."
3. Accept all suggestions respectfully and write them on newsprint or markerboard. After all the ideas are recorded, comment that you want to keep your class agreement short. Work together to combine similar suggestions. Keep the language very simple.
4. Highlight positive behavior by rephrasing any suggestions that begin with "do not." For example, "Speak kindly to one another" instead of "Do not say mean things."
5. Limit the list to four or five rules. When everyone is satisfied with the list, copy it onto a clean sheet of newsprint or poster board. Have each learner and teacher sign it.
6. Display this list in a prominent place and encourage newcomers to add their signatures.



**Conversations on
Matthew 18:15–20**

Discuss this passage in light of the commentary below.

Idea! Show a portion of the award-winning documentary *The Interrupters* at pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/interrupters/. Discuss what makes these three “interrupters” so effective at reconciliation.

WHAT is important to know?

Matthew 18:15–20 has parallels with 16:13–20. Both passages use the word “church” (*ekklēsia*)—the only two places the term appears in the Gospels—and both passages speak of binding and loosing. Even though this passage is primarily concerned with matters of church discipline, its focus is on reconciliation, not punishment. The ultimate goal is to “regain the brother” (v. 15). Familial language is used. The final saying in verse 20 is a reminder to the community that the risen Christ is present in and with the church, even when the church must deal with disciplinary issues. This reminder serves as a word of assurance and as a precaution. (*Mitchell G. Reddish*)

- ✠ What do the terms “bind” and “loose” refer to in this passage? How do those terms relate to reconciliation?
- ✠ What, if any, is the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation?
- ✠ How is the reference to “church” important?

WHERE is God in these words?

Jesus speaks here not of honest differences of opinion but of a fellow Christian who “sins against you.” Such sin would include the offenses summarized in the Ten Commandments, but one might extrapolate it to mean any self-serving behavior that breaks the unity of fellowship in Christ. When church members injure one another, it is not merely an individual personal offense: it is a theological matter, harming the body of Christ. Each step outlined by Jesus is to be undertaken in the hope of healing and restoration. Jesus could mean this: if we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it? (*Charles Hambrick-Stowe*)

- ✠ What is the difference between a difference of opinion and the kind of disagreement described in the text?
- ✠ How might the presence of Christ affect our approach to conflict or disagreement?
- ✠ What is the difference between “forgive and forget” and “forgive and heal”?

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

The ministry of reconciliation must be at the heart of any Christian community’s mission. The church has not been given the power to “bind” and to “loose” (v. 18) because it is always right, but because its primary language is one of confession, restoration, and reconciliation when offenses and divisions occur. This requires leadership that confesses in real time before the community, seeking collective accountability and correction as it returns the favor to the church body. There will be conflict, but it is precisely through conflict that we model for the world how to bind and loose one another appropriately. (*Jin S. Kim*)

- ✠ How can the church model appropriate “binding” and “loosing” for the world?
- ✠ How is the ministry of reconciliation present in your congregation?

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

Care and responsibility to forgive, to seek out reconciliation with the offender, are sustained in the authority given to the church. Power to bind and loose belongs not simply to the church leader or to the universal church (as demonstrated through Peter in Matt. 16:13–20), but also to the local church (18:18–20). This discipline teaches a theology of care by illumining the manner of care. The authority to interpret how to apply the rules of care, even the law, is given to the church. We seek to care for one another even when injured or offended, which requires discipline in binding and loosing ourselves to repent and to forgive, all sustained in Christ. (*Dale P. Andrews*)

- ✠ What are some things that you “bind” and “loose” in your own life? Are there changes needed in what you “bind” and “loose”?
- ✠ What might your church do differently if the conflict were addressed using the method described by Jesus?
- ✠ What are some things a church should be careful about when using this method to address conflict or disagreement?

God of grace, you have reconciled us to yourself in Jesus Christ. Give us the courage, energy, patience, and love to seek reconciliation with each other. Amen.

Semicontinuous
Exod. 12:1–14
Ps. 149
Complementary
Ezek. 33:7–11
Ps. 119:33–40
Rom. 13:8–14
Matt. 18:15–20

Restorative Discipline

Goal for the Session *Adults will envision ways to practice reconciliation in the faith community through exploring Jesus' teachings on restorative discipline.*

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 18:15–20

WHAT is important to know?

—From “Exegetical Perspective” by Mitchell G. Reddish

Matthew 18:15–20 has parallels with 16:13–20. Both passages use the word “church” (*ekklēsia*)—the only two places the term appears in the Gospels—and both passages speak of binding and loosing. Even though this passage is primarily concerned with matters of church discipline, its focus is on reconciliation, not punishment. The ultimate goal is to “regain the brother” (v. 15). Familial language is used. The final saying in verse 20 is a reminder to the community that the risen Christ is present in and with the church, even when the church must deal with disciplinary issues. This reminder serves as a word of assurance and as a precaution.

WHERE is God in these words?

—From “Theological Perspective” by Charles Hambrick-Stowe

Jesus speaks here not of honest differences of opinion but of a fellow Christian who “sins against you.” Such sin would include the offenses summarized in the Ten Commandments, but one might extrapolate it to mean any self-serving behavior that breaks the unity of fellowship in Christ. When church members injure one another, it is not merely an individual personal offense: it is a theological matter, harming the body of Christ. Each step outlined by Jesus is to be undertaken in the hope of healing and restoration. Jesus could mean this: if we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it?

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

—From “Pastoral Perspective” by Jin S. Kim

The ministry of reconciliation must be at the heart of any Christian community’s mission. The church has not been given the power to “bind” and to “loose” (v. 18) because it is always right, but because its primary language is one of confession, restoration, and reconciliation when offenses and divisions occur. This requires leadership that confesses in real time before the community, seeking collective accountability and correction as it returns the favor to the church body. There will be conflict, but it is precisely through conflict that we model for the world how to bind and loose one another appropriately.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

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Care and responsibility to forgive, to seek out reconciliation with the offender, are sustained in the authority given to the church. Power to bind and loose belongs not simply to the church leader or to the universal church (as demonstrated through Peter in Matt. 16:13–20), but also to the local church (18:18–20). This discipline teaches a theology of care by illumining the manner of care. The authority to interpret how to apply the rules of care, even the law, is given to the church. We seek to care for one another even when injured or offended, which requires discipline in binding and loosing ourselves to repent and to forgive, all sustained in Christ.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 18:15–20

Focus on Your Teaching

Most adults will be able to recall specific experiences of conflict in the church. Some may have seen reconciliation emerge out of such situations. Some may have witnessed the havoc wrought when the inability to reconcile leads to schism or ostracism. Today's text beckons the church to consider faithful ways to respond when estrangement looms. The text offers insights into what might lead to restoration in such times. Be aware that this session might strike a nerve in those for whom a serious congregational or denominational conflict is recent or ongoing.

*Be with me, O God, in my preparation and in my leading of this session.
And may I be open to your presence in both. Amen.*

YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint
- marker
- broken object
- Bibles
- Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 13, 2020

For Responding

- option 1: Resource Sheet 2
- option 2: newsprint, markers, church guidelines for conflict resolution or ethical misconduct (optional)
- option 3: Resource Sheet 2

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, write the quote used in the Exploring sidebar on a sheet of newsprint, and set it aside.

Welcome participants as they arrive. Introduce any newcomers. If this is the group's first time together after summer break, get reacquainted. For example, ask everyone to describe their summer in five words or less.

Hold up the broken object (or its pieces) and ask for ideas about how to restore it. Ask: What would you have to be careful to do; what would you have to be careful not to do? For example: If the broken object were wood, you wouldn't want to use a welding torch!

Relate that today's session is part of a series of teachings by Jesus about reconciliation in the church when relationships get broken.

Lead the group in this prayer or one of your choosing:

Gather us, O God, as your people. Gather us in the knowledge that you dwell in our midst. Gather us that we may be led by your Spirit. Amen.

EXPLORING

Have a volunteer read Matthew 18:15–20 aloud to the group while others follow along in their Bibles. Invite general reactions to the text.

Read the "What?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 18:15–20), beginning at the sentence "Even though this passage is primarily concerned . . ." Discuss what participants understand "reconciliation" to mean in the context of this passage.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Digging Deeper). Direct participants to silently read and reflect on Part 1, “Setting the Context for Matthew 18:15–20.”

Ask participants to listen to Matthew 18:15–20 as you read it aloud—only now, have them listen to the passage through the insights raised by the “Setting the Context” paragraph. After the reading, ask participants to offer any fresh impressions or questions about this passage.

Form three groups. Direct the first group to take the role of the one who has been sinned against in this passage; the second group to take the role of the one who has offended; and the third group to take the role of the “witnesses” and the church. In each group, discuss what Jesus’ teachings in these verses encourage you to do, and to what purpose.

Gather the three groups together, and have each group report on their discussion. Reflect on similarities and differences between the actions and purposes that the groups identified.

Read aloud verse 17b (“ . . . and if the offender refuses to listen . . .”). Ask participants what they understand to be the implications for community and relationship of “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Post the newsprint with the sidebar quote written on it for participants to read. Afterward, discuss how that perspective might influence what we take Jesus to be saying here.

“Churches usually hear this as license to excommunicate, exile, or otherwise shun the individual. However, since Jesus often interacted with Gentiles, tax collectors, prostitutes, and other unsavory outsiders, we should think more deeply about his meaning.”¹

Ask participants to consider the final sentence of the “What?” excerpt, which declares verse 20 to serve as both “a word of assurance and as a precaution.” Discuss the following issues:

- ✪ How might the promise of Christ’s presence bring assurance in this text: to the one who has been offended; to the one who has offended; to the whole community?
- ✪ How might the promise of Christ’s presence serve as a precaution in this text: to the one who has been offended; to the one who has offended; to the whole community?

In this conversation, link such assurances and precautions to Jesus’ overarching concern, in this passage and its wider context, for disciplines aimed at reconciliation.

Responding

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

1. **Cutting Loose—or Hanging On?** Reconciliation is a discipline precisely because what it calls on us to do may not be easy to do. Read Part 2, “Cutting Loose—Or Hanging On?” on Resource Sheet 2. Invite participants to recall times when they or their churches faced decisions about “cutting loose or hanging on”—whether in regard to a particular individual or a group within the church. Discuss what reconciliation required in those circumstances—or where it foundered. Challenge participants to do at least one thing this week that maintains ties with someone it might be easier to just cut loose, inside or outside the church.

EASY
PREP

1. Excerpted from *Charles Hambrick-Stowe, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 48.

Your church may have a set of guidelines for conflict resolution or ethical misconduct. If so, it might be helpful to have these on hand, and to compare the process related there with option 2 in Responding.

- 2. Taking Steps toward Reconciliation** The steps Jesus uses in addressing estrangement in hope of restoration provide a helpful outline for reviewing how we seek to do the same. Have the participants create a “checklist” for dealing with conflict and estrangement in your congregation based on Jesus’ teachings here. Write these on newsprint. Discuss at each point the value and the risk of each stage. Encourage participants to use this list in situations it might apply to in their lives outside of church.
- 3. A Litany of Confession and Restoration** Prayer and worship form the nexus of faithful action, including reconciliation. Invite participants to offer prayers that confess places of estrangement in the church and needs for reconciliation. After each prayer, lead the group in a litany response found in Part 2 of Resource Sheet 2: “If we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it?” Urge participants to make this response a regular part of their prayer life.

Closing

Gather in a circle around the broken object. Invite participants to remember the things they thought would be helpful or harmful for restoring this object. Invite them now to look at the broken object as a symbol of the church—and the discipline required for restoration. Ask them to name what this session has identified as leading toward reconciliation in the community of faith.

If you did not use option 3 in Responding, lead the group in the litany it describes. If you used option 3 in Responding, close with this prayer or one of your choosing:

Holy God, your grace restores us—and in doing so, calls us to be reconciled with one another. Be among us, as the One whose very presence reminds us of that calling and bears to us the grace to be reconciled. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 13, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

Focus on Matthew 18:15–20

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Digging Deeper



Part 1 Setting the Context for Matthew 18:15–20

This passage comes in the middle of a larger section in which Matthew has Jesus dealing with matters related to ecclesiology and life in the church. Prominent leaders (who might be considered “greatest in the kingdom of heaven”) are to have the humble status of a child and serve among the lowly (Matthew 18:1–5); disciples must eschew behavior that “put[s] a stumbling block” in the path of fellow believers (18:6–7), becoming radically scrupulous about personal morality (18:8–9); believers must care diligently for one another so that not one will be lost (18:10–14); and fellowship in Christ requires constant and boundless forbearance, forgiving one another “seventy times seven” if necessary (18:21–35). In this context Jesus addresses the question of what to do when “a brother” (i.e., “another member of the church”) “sins against you” (v. 15).

—Excerpted from Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 44.

Part 2 Cutting Loose—Or Hanging On

The rest of the world writes people off when things reach a certain point. Jesus’ saying, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (v. 18), is susceptible to multiple interpretations. In light of his teaching on life in the church as the locus of God’s mission in the world, and this verse’s echo of the Lord’s Prayer (God’s will being done “on earth as it is in heaven”), Jesus could mean this: If we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it? . . . Jesus commands us never to give up on them, never to stop reaching out in love to them, always to yearn for grace to restore what has been broken.

—Excerpted from Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 48.