

“Before you Unfriend”
Matthew 18:15-20
First Presbyterian Church
September 11, 2017

Our reading is from Matthew, Ch. 18:15-20:

If another member of the church sins against you, talk about him behind his back. Call her out and embarrass her in public. If another member of the church sins against you, Shoot off a nasty email using all CAPS and lots of exclamation points. Or, if another member of the church sins against you, Forget ‘em! Delete his contact information. Unfriend her on Facebook. And if need be, leave the church. This is the word of the Lord.

No. THIS is the word of the Lord.

¹⁵“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. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, 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. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Sermon

Thankfully, it hasn’t happened all that often... but from time to time I have watched a member of the church lose his or her romantic notions about Christians. Sometimes all it takes a committee member that shuts down any new ideas because “We’ve never done it that way!” Other times folks divide up on either side of an issue... they are either for or against a certain staff member. But whatever it is, sooner or later words are exchanged... feelings get hurt... motivation is questioned... and right before my eyes a person’s romantic image of the church is lost forever.¹

Their response is fairly predictable: “I thought we were all supposed to be Christians here. Why can’t we just get along?” Apparently, Matthew had no such romantic illusions. As Tom Long says:

¹ This sermon is an adaptation of one I preached on September 11, 2011 at Collegiate Presbyterian Church, Ames, IA.

By the time he sat down to write his Gospel, he knew the church was not all sweet thoughts... endlessly patient saints... and cloudless skies. No, in Matthew's church, people are still people, (no matter how committed they are) and stormy "relational" weather is always a possible forecast. "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love"; even so, painful breaks can occur in once tender and loving relationships. "We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord"; nevertheless, sharp and cruel words can split a congregation into angry factions. "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord"; but greed, lust, and envy can threaten to shake even a strong church off its footing.

So what happens when it does? What happens when the menu at the church potluck includes not only fried chicken and banana pudding... but healthy portions of dissension and rage and betrayal?² Well, Matthew hearkens back to something Jesus said to his disciples one day. We can safely assume that twelve men living together 24/7 would eventually have some "issues" with each other. So, according to Matthew, Jesus breaks from telling "kingdom parables" long enough to offer a detailed process with which his followers might deal with those "issues." We might even think of this as a very early example of "church order".

Allow me to summarize Jesus' salient points: People sin. (Can I get an Amen?) Churches are full of people who sin. (Can I get another Amen?) When that happens and you're involved, first of all, do something about it! Like a mature adult, go talk to the other person directly rather than gossiping behind his back or slamming her on social media. If that doesn't work, involve some others of the community – NOT to gang up... and NOT to witness against the offender. No, you bring in others because others are already involved. The church is a community and any time there is a toxic relationship between two members of that community, you can bet it will soon involve many more. So involve others... and if THAT doesn't work... if the person refuses to listen EVEN to the church, then you are to let them be to you as a Gentile and tax collector.³ (We'll come back to that later!)

Earlier I mentioned "church order" – mainly to poke some fun at ourselves since we have a whole BOOK of order... but also to acknowledge that many Christian groups and denominations have used this process in Matthew 18 as "church order": as a model for handling sin and conflict in the church... NOT because it's guaranteed to work – it isn't – but because it's a process that is based on the wisdom of Jesus rather than the wisdom of this world... a process based on Gospel values rather than the values of this world.

First, there's Jesus' wisdom in moving from the individual to the communal... from the individual to the communal.⁴ Where there is sin, Jesus says, deal with it directly... one-

² Thomas G. Long in his commentary on Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion (WJK, 1997) p. 209

³ David Lose in his essay "What Kind of Community Will We Be?" posted August 28, 2011 on workingpreacher.org.

to-one... face-to-face. If this doesn't solve the problem, include one or two others in the conversation. And then, if that fails take it to the community as a whole. You see, from a direct, honest, and hopefully constructive conversation between two people... to the attention of an ever-widening circle of the community, the flow/movement of the passage clearly recognizes what Paul will later describe as the "body of Christ"... a body with many individual members... each member connected to the other in the bond of Jesus' Spirit... and each member is needed for the healthy functioning of the whole. And if sin has created something toxic between two of the individual parts... if conflict has led to a break in the body... then the health of the whole body will very soon be compromised. Some of you may have been a part of a church in which this happened.

The thing is this isn't easy... it's not easy at all. Getting up the courage to call someone you feel has sinned against you..... and to make an appointment to meet face-to-face... and to deal with head on with the feelings involved... THAT is a whole lot harder than talking behind his or her back! Bringing in others to advise and listen closely to what is said - that takes a lot more courage than tweeting a zinger or posting a disparaging comment on Facebook. It's just hard work!⁵

Yet, Jesus seems pretty clear: this is his way – that no one of his followers be written off in haste... that no one is fired on the spot... that no one slams the door in another's face in rage... that no relationship is ever given up on completely. Instead, an entire sea of energy is expended to make peace... great effort is needed to work toward reconciliation... and for Jesus, reconciliation is ALWAYS the goal. Restoring the relationship is ALWAYS the goal. We know this because immediately before today's text Jesus gives us this beautiful picture of a shepherd who is searching high and low for a sheep who has gone astray. This is not just a sentimental idea that makes for a great stained glass window... it reveals the intentional... painstaking... step-by-step process of trying to bring a community back together... of trying to restore harmony between sisters and brothers in Christ. The purpose is always to regain the sister... the goal is always to restore the brother ... and the process Jesus offers us is meant to help us do that.⁶

I hope those of you who were here last Sunday are hearing connections between Jesus' teaching here in Matthew and Paul's words to the Romans: Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought to what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. OK, so if Jesus gives us this process that acknowledges there will be sin and conflict in the church

⁴ Karl Jacobson in his essay on this text on workingpreacher.org

⁵ David Lose in his essay entitled "Community" posted on September 5, 2017 on Workingpreacher.org

⁶ Long, p. 210.

and which seeks reconciliation above all else... then what happens if ALL of these efforts fail? What if a member of the community insists on continuing in sin... or what if they are so committed to their position that they refuse to listen even to the church?

What then? This question is not just theoretical for one congregation in our presbytery. As a member of our presbytery's Committee on Ministry, I'm aware this is happening in one of our congregations: there is a church member who is truly very toxic. And despite the continued efforts of the pastor... of individuals and small groups of session members... and finally of a letter sent from the entire session... this person seems to have absolutely no interest in anything but being right... anything but winning the battle... and is now refusing all invitations to dialogue while continuing to spread falsehoods and create dissension in the congregation. Over the past several months this situation has consumed a great deal of time and energy from a small group of church leaders, but now it is known throughout the congregation and has become a genuine threat (at least in the short term) to the ongoing ministry and mission of that entire congregation. What happens next? is the question that this congregation's pastor and session and even our Committee on Ministry is faced with.

According to Jesus, what happens next is a truly fearful thing: "Let such a one," said Jesus, "be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." I said we would come back to this line because I know that to me and perhaps to many you this sounds so counter-intuitive... to essentially excommunicate a member of the church... to cut off a part of your spiritual body... well, it sounds so UN-Christian! And just to make this final act EVEN MORE solemn, Jesus goes on to say that in doing this the church acts not only by its own authority, but with heavenly authority. This is not simply a religious affinity group kicking out a quarrelsome troublemaker. No, this is the church acting in the name of God: "Whatever you bind on earth," Jesus said, "will be bound in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Did you hear those last words? We all know them – where two are three are gathered in my name I am there among them – but how many of us know THIS was when Jesus spoke them? Just at the point when the church is doing the unthinkable when the church is disciplining one of its members, Jesus affirms that he is there with them. What could this mean?

Well, I don't think it's by chance that the very next story Matthew tells is the story of Jesus' interaction with Peter regarding forgiveness. No sooner has Jesus outlined this process for repairing broken relationships in the church than Peter, the designated spokesman for the disciples, steps forward seeking clarification. You remember this – Peter says Jesus, "Lord, I hear what you're saying about restoration and all, but tell me this: if I am the victim of someone else's sin, how often should I forgive?" Peter wants to

know the statute of limitations on sin... and we get it! Given the human condition, this sin-forgiveness thing could go on for quite awhile. So how many times does a follower of Jesus have to get on the forgiveness treadmill? “As many as seven times?” Peter asks, thinking that should be more than enough.⁷ Jesus’ answer is astonishing: “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven.”

So once again allow me to summarize: Jesus says, essentially, that being a member of the church means you have a responsibility. If a sheep gets lost you go look for it... and not just for an hour and call it quits. As a church, you get out there and find that sheep. And if that sheep refuses to be found... refuses to be brought back in... then you treat him as a Gentile or tax collector... but of course, we know from the Gospel of Matthew how Jesus showed mercy to Gentiles and ate with tax collectors. And finally, if your brother or sister sins against you seventy times seven times, that's how many times you forgive him.

Authentic community is hard to find. It probably always has been, but it seem particularly hard today. And it's work. It's hard work... but it's worth it! Because when you find it, it's like discovering a little bit of heaven on earth. And, as Jesus promises, when you act toward one another in this way – with honesty and integrity and forgiveness... even when it's hard – truly amazing things can happen... because Jesus is with you, right there, in your very midst.

Some years ago I deeply offended someone in the church. This was a long-time member... he was in his 40's and had grown up in that church. This was someone I had a relationship with... someone I considered a friend. Though you don't need to know all the details, when I preached his mother's funeral I spoke about something I wrongly assumed I had permission to speak about. You can surely imagine how betrayed and angry and hurt he felt. I didn't intend any harm, but I clearly did harm. Well, I don't know if it had anything to do with Jesus' words in Matthew 18, but the day after the funeral he called me and asked to meet with me. I knew this had to be so hard for him. He came to my home and sitting in my den he confronted me with what I had done. He did it directly, respectfully... and most important, he did it in love. And he was right. I had messed up. I should've done things differently and if I could do it over, I would. I asked for his forgiveness, and he gave it to me. My sin was not forgotten, but it was forgiven.

It was one of the most difficult conversations I had ever had. And I hope I never have to have another one like it. But it was worth it. Because what happened as we talked... what happened as I asked to be forgiven... what happened when he forgave me... is that together we experienced a little bit of heaven on earth. As the two of us were gathered together in Jesus' name, he was there with us. That I know with all my heart.

⁷ Long, p.211.

Charge:

One of the things that plagues most Christian communities (and other communities no doubt) is the inability to handle confrontation, disagreement and our mutual accountability when it comes to sin.

We simply don't know how to live together, fight together, and stay together. And this is because we all of us -- and not just our brother or sister -- are sinners.

So here's the question all of us are asked to answer: what kind of community they want to be? What kind of community do we want from our congregation -- largely social, somewhat superficial (which is, of course, safe)?

Or do we want something more meaningful or intimate (which is riskier and harder)?

Do we want a place that can both encourage us and hold us accountable?

Are we looking for a place we can be honest about our hopes and fears, dreams and anxieties?

Do we want somewhere we can just blend in or are we looking for a place we can really make a difference?