

A Community of Reconciliation and Restoration

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Matthew 18: 15-20

I can still see him. He was in his late twenties, I guess. He and his wife were members of a large church where I was Associate Pastor years ago, as were his wife's parents. And they had a little girl who was about three or four at the time. He and his wife took regular turns on the list of volunteers to keep the nursery during worship. As I said, it was a large congregation and there were, I think, always four volunteers back there at a time. But, then their marriage failed and they separated. But, he continued to bring the little girl to church on the Sundays that he had her, and he continued to take his turn in the Nursery.

And that was the way it was until the Senior Pastor and I were informed by the wife's mother that in the divorce proceedings, her daughter was accusing this husband of molesting their little girl. It was a hard situation. We had some long staff meetings about it. In the short term, of course, we had to take him off the Nursery volunteers list. But, in the mean time, the wife and her mother were making no secret among their friends in the congregation of what they were saying he'd done. The Body of Christ that was that congregation seemed at that point far from being a community of reconciliation. And some might have asked why should they keep that a secret? Why should they try to reconcile with such a person, in fact why should he be allowed in church with them? Why should they have to worship with him? And you know, when an accusation like that is made, you sometimes start thinking to yourself, "you know, he does seem a little strange." And pretty soon the person's reputation and standing in the community is trashed.

Well, apparently either Jesus himself in forming this new community with his disciples, or perhaps Matthew in his church was concerned with some similar kind of problem. You know, we've often read this gospel lesson from Matthew as a blueprint for church discipline. Perhaps we've seen it as a balanced approach, but finally even so, we've seen it as being primarily about what the church has to do to maintain its reputation and integrity. But, you know context is everything, and this passage is preceded by a section that begins with Jesus saying: "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones..." who have stumbled in some way...gone astray. And then Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep... how the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine on the mountains and goes after this *one*...apparently one that was despised. Saying, "so it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost."

And then immediately following the passage for today, Peter asks Jesus, "if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" And we know Jesus' answer to that one, don't we? Infinitely. There is no end... seventy *times* seven. So, you see, the problem in the church which is being addressed is that apparently there were people in the church, or perhaps the whole church, who were willing to just "write off" someone who'd done something injurious to them. The temptation was to despise them and write them off.

Well, we know that temptation. We are all too willing to write certain people off, you and I, aren't we? And it doesn't even have to be someone one who's done something that has hurt us personally, which is, of course, the easiest of all to write off. But, it can just be someone whose values we find offensive. Or, it can be someone who's done something to hurt someone else, maybe someone we know, or maybe not. Maybe it's just something we've heard about. Which, of course, brings us to just why Jesus is concerned to offer a different way for the church.

When we were discussing this in Bible Study at Loaves and Fishes the other night, I asked the question, "What would be the alternative to going to someone who's hurt you and trying to talk about the issue when the two of you are alone?" And someone immediately responded, "telling

all your friends about it.” That's why this text is not about piety. It's not about keeping yours or the church's reputation pure and above question. It's about ethics. Because, telling all your friends about what someone did to you starts the process by which others... friends of the offending person, neighbors, authorities, begin to place blame and shame. It's about ethics. An accusation, rumor and gossip have the power to destroy someone, don't they? We see it over and over again all around. So, the question is how do we the church, how does the body of Christ become a community that lives differently with each other? Because, as it is, you and I, like our surrounding culture, are far too willing just to write people off.

Friends, Jesus is concerned to offer a different way. This text is not about institutional exclusion. Listen, Jesus says first go to the person when it's just the two of you and try to express how they've hurt you. And I want you to hear that. It's done from the place of hurt, from the place of vulnerability. It's not done from a place of anger or moral superiority. See, because nowhere does Jesus in describing this meeting, say try to get them to repent. Instead, he says, if they listen to you, you've regained that one. If they listen, if they really understand how you've been hurt...because the assumption is, then they've entered that same place of vulnerability and pain with you, and knowing how that *feels*, they *will* be sorry and the two of you can begin life together again.

How many times has a conflict been healed just because you've felt listened to, or you've been able to let down your defenses and truly listen and enter into the other's hurt? And I want you to hear that same concern even in the next two things Jesus talks about. It doesn't then *change* and become about punishing and excluding after that, if the person doesn't listen, if they refuse to enter into your hurt. But, rather it's about how important it is that reconciliation be achieved! You don't give up on reconciling and then go to blaming and gossiping! No, you go back and take one or two others with you. And that's to be done in vulnerability and humility, too. And who knows, maybe more often than not you as the accuser might be found to be off base, too!

And finally involve 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.” And always too willing to revert to “us and them” thinking, we read that as treating such a one as an “outsider,” right? But, how does the church treat “outsiders?” You remember, it was tax collectors whom Jesus chose to dine with. You remember, at the end of Matthew's gospel, the church is commissioned to preach the good news to “all nations,” that is, the Gentiles. For the church, treating someone as a “Gentile and a tax collector” means offering the radical offensive inclusion demanded by the gospel! It means that we understand this person needs know how very valuable and special God has made them. It just means we're back to square one with them, as we all end up there again sometimes, of really needing to deeply appropriate the love of God for us... that we might turn from death and enter life again.

Friends, Jesus is saying that the Body of Christ, the church, is a community of reconciliation concerned that none ever be lost from loving relationships. He's saying that maintaining those loving, caring relationships is of eternal importance. It is holy work. That's what it means to say what we bind or loose here, is bound or loosed in heaven. It is holy work! And that's what Jesus is talking about in terms of prayer as well. When he says “if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask it will be done...” That's not a fill in the blank. The context is reconciliation and restoration of relationship. When two people agree about their reconciliation, and pray to God about it, God will grant that.

God is there, Christ is there among them. Because, that *is* the work of God. That *is* the work of Christ. And this meal is the central symbol of the reality of who we are called to be and who we are being made together in Christ. It is a picture of the way to be a community that lives differently with each other. Eating is one of the most intimate things we do together, isn't it? You don't just have anyone over for dinner, do you? But here, we do. Here Christ has us all, as

different as we are, as much as we all miss the mark... Christ has us all over for dinner. And knowing ourselves as forgiven, knowing ourselves reconciled to God by such undeserved forgiveness...we can eat with and be reconciled to one and all. Friends, let no one ever be lost to loving relationship, but instead do the holy work of reconciliation. It's who we are.

Amen.