

13th September 2020
Relationships Matter
Matthew 18:15-20

I had some difficulty putting a title to our reading for today. In some Bibles it is headed, "Dealing with Sin in the Church". While that does speak to one aspect of the text, I felt it had a far broader application. I thought maybe "Confrontation: Speaking the truth in love" was an option, or "The purpose of Church Discipline". I finally settled with "Relationships Matter". This is true in general, as well as specifically within the Church. Consider these examples:

Susan was afraid to go to her boss and tell him that his suggestive humour was offensive. John didn't like the way that the leader of the committee always interrupted and put people down. Barb was hurt because in the ministry meeting, she never seemed to be listened to. But, Susan, John and Barb didn't say anything. They didn't confront. They didn't want to rock the boat, or cause trouble.

Today's text, is a powerful passage about conflict and confrontation, and how we deal with conflict within the body of the church. I think it has application for many contexts that we find ourselves in.

This text is about the power of the Spirit to work in community as people "speak the truth" in love, and build a community upon honesty, transparency, the power to forgive and to heal.

When we look at the church today, we see a lot of problems with discipline in the church. It is either lax or legalistic. It should be neither, but it is! The problem of gossip is also rampant. The offender is not confronted with his or her sin. Instead it is put on the gossip line. This is certainly contrary to the teaching of Jesus. How many church communities have been torn apart over fractured personal relationships? Jesus desires reconciliation in the church.

Offenses, if they are offenses, cannot just be swept under the rug. They need to be dealt with in a spirit of love, and the hope of reconciliation, if possible! If we take into consideration the seventy and seven times, we are to forgive those who offend against us, it seems that the benefit of the doubt should go to the offender. This is in the very passage that we will consider next week, so we need to see it as part of our consideration of this one.

As times get increasingly difficult for Christians in this world, we need, all the more, to be both united and disciplined. So, there needs to be discipline. We must have boundaries. We are not to be like the world. The spirit of the age must not rule in our churches, but the "Holy" Spirit.

In many places in our world, Christians are under severe persecution. In other places, we are tempted to compromise our faith to avoid persecution. But, we need the discipline of Christ and the power of Christ to sustain us. When we are disciplined, it reminds us we are part of God's family. So, Christ will discipline us, either directly, or more often through the Spirit-filled church.

As I thought about this, I started to list issues that we have experienced over some 50+ years that cause division and hinder relationships within the church. I would encourage

you to make your own list and use them to seek forgiveness, repentance and healing. I asked Nola to assist me, these are our top ten (not in order):

1. Power & control
2. Pride
3. Personality & temperament differences
4. Refusal to forgive
5. Theological differences
6. Judgmental attitudes
7. Lack of Love
8. Unconfessed sin
9. Gossip
10. Discrimination

The first thing I want to do is to “exegete” this passage. Exegete is a word used by students of the Bible which means, before you apply the passage to our contemporary setting, it is important to know how this passage might have been received by the first readers and hearers of the text in the second half of the first century.

V15 *“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over”.*

If someone “sins” against you, it means someone does something to you that breaks the bonds of fellowship, that causes separation in the body, that “misses the mark” of faithful living. I think this is more than mere disagreement; this is something that threatens the identity of the fellowship.

First, go by yourself and see if you can reconcile, but if it doesn’t work then take two or three with you. Taking two or three is mandated by Jewish law. And the two or three are not to be your advocates, ganging up on the one who “sinned,” but objective third-party observers to make sure that the engagement is fair, that the accuser and accused are on equal footing – to hold everyone accountable.

If your face-to-face encounter and then the small group advocacy don’t seem to work then you are to take it to the church. That puts a whole new spin on Sunday mornings!

Today there is shunning in some churches; the person is cast out of the community. In Martin Luther’s day there was excommunication – you were no longer given communion; you were cut off. In our Church of Christ Reporting & Misconduct system which make very difficult decision in issues of minister or leadership misconduct.

According to Matthew to be so shunned or removed meant that the community treated the person as a *“Gentile or a tax collector.”*

Now, that is interesting. Because Jesus specifically got in trouble for eating with tax collectors and Gentiles. So, it seems that while discipline may be called for, it is never forever; rather the person becomes a focus of special care.

The purpose is never to cut off, but to bring back – to reconcile. That is important to remember.

So, what is being described in Matthew’s gospel here is something big, that is really destructive to yourself or to the community.

A one-on-one, face-to-face encounter with the person you are having a problem with is the right thing to do. It is so much healthier than to go to somebody else and say you have a problem with someone and the person you are having a problem with remains in the dark, but perhaps senses that something is amiss.

A healthy community, a healthy family, lives one-on-one relational encounters. It is a sign of a functional and blessed community. To take that faithful and honest step of encounter shows great maturity and trust.

Speaking truth in love is not easy but it is the essence of relationship: any good friendship, partnership, or marriage. You have to be able to speak your truth, to let it all hang out. Disappointment is inevitable but reconciliation is always possible if that is the goal.

I have learned that, when someone says: "Alan, what you said was racist or unfair", my first reaction is: "I didn't mean that." Or "I was just joking." Or I roll my eyes and think the other person has the problem. Sometimes I just retreat, feeling foolish, not willing to say anything else so I won't get in any more trouble.

And I might have not intended my words to have the impact they did. I actually might have been joking. Yes, the other person might have their own stuff to work through ... but I have to listen before I speak. I can learn from the feedback, and it never hurts to say "I'm sorry, I will try to do better. It wasn't my intention to hurt you and I regret the impact of my words."

For when you love somebody and you need to tell the truth, you are longing for reconciliation. You long to let go of the tension, of the anger, of the disagreement and look at it together because holding on to something and not expressing it causes internal angst and destruction, it leads to resentment. And what is resentment but "taking poison and waiting for the other person to die!"

And just as speaking up is hard, so too is listening and hearing. And as one who has been on the receiving end of a few of these face-to-face encounters I have learned to always say, "Thank you!" Most times my first reaction to being told that I have done something wrong is to get a bit defensive and argue. But there is a reason somebody is coming to you to share their perspective or their truth – it may not be your truth – but if someone is coming to you, willing to bear their soul, then take it as a gift.

v20, we have the verse "*where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them.*" This has so often been quoted that Jesus is present in small gatherings, so we should not become discouraged by low church attendance. As true as the idea that we are called to be faithful and not judge success by numbers, this is not really what is meant here. We need only go back a few verses where it says that in times of having to judge matters in the church it might be necessary to gather two or three as a witness.

It seems to me that is what is meant here. The church is the body of Christ. Where the body of Christ is, Jesus is in the midst. The two or three who are called in matters of judgment need to be godly men or women full of the Spirit. They have to exercise judgment as agents of Jesus Christ who gives His authority to their judgment in the matter.

Amy Morin, in Psychology Today writes that many avoid confrontation, claiming “I’m a peacemaker,” or “I don’t want to ruffle feathers.” She describes 6 practical steps to getting over conflict avoidance:

1. Identify that you have a problem – why are you nervous to speak up?
2. Think about what you will gain by speaking up – often the other side of truth is liberation!
3. Fear of confrontation is based on false assumptions – your internal tape recorder is stuck on “don’t talk back!”
4. Address one issue at a time – and make it a small one the first time! I have been scared to say something to somebody, and then I finally do and I find that the person is really accepting and the relationship has deepened!
5. Stick to “I” statements. Instead of blaming the other, express how you are feeling. Don’t say “You are an arrogant so and so!” Rather say: “I felt disrespected by how you addressed me.”
6. Keep practicing. The more you speak up the better you will get at it. It is empowering to speak your truth. Christian community is about empowerment and acceptance and being the people of God! We are to loose, and we are to bind.

Truth telling and faithful confrontation is at the heart of the gospel – the gospel that confronts us that **all** have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, **but** all have been made alive and accepted through Jesus Christ.

On this foundation we are to build the church, living powerfully, speaking our truth in love, listening to others, changing the world!

Wherever you go, whatever church, family, or group of people you are with, sin will happen. As a result, there will be a need for reconciliation. Because relationships are so important to God, Jesus explains a very clear and practical way to deal with these conflicts. It *will* require effort and will most likely be uncomfortable. But all of these efforts can pay huge dividends if we can reconcile with one another. Conflict handled well can create strong bonds of fellowship, peace, and harmony in the congregation.

Relationships matter, but they require a lot of effort to keep them healthy and good. When I need some extra motivation to do my part, I imagine what God would do in my situation. I know God will pursue us to the end of existence. God was even willing to give His Son Jesus over to be tortured and crucified to repair our broken relationship with Him.

Remembering what Jesus did gives me good motivation to put forth the effort to reconcile relationships in my life.

Prayer.