

Matthew 18: 15-20

Family Matters

Can I trust you? Can you trust me? Do we love and trust one another enough that we are willing to risk hurt feelings or some uncomfortable conversation to insure that our relationship, our family of faith can gain strength and grow?

Issues of trust lie at the heart of all significant relationships. And trustworthiness in a family of faith---well that is what makes so much of God's grace and joy possible. This morning Jesus takes us to school in what it means to be truly trustworthy and whole as a believing community.

He leads us into the tender and challenging work of creating the opportunities for restoration and reconciliation when there is an issue of injury or dispute among members of a faith community:

"Jesus said, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone."

I think we all know that sometimes our first instinct in a conflict situation like this is often to go and tell anyone but the person with whom we are in contention that we have been offended. Either that or we stew in silence and default to an illusion of harmony that only creates tense silences and awkward moments for others in the community who look on and wonder "what was that all about?" Or worse yet, we employ the very modern horror of the "ambush" email. In this unhelpful strategy we air out our grievance before God and anybody with an email address!

And then he goes on: *"If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But 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.*

If 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. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

I think that these instructions are even potentially more difficult than the first. You see, most of the churches in our experience are made up of several polite strangers who gather on Sundays and have what my grandmother used to call a "nodding acquaintance." This is where we know each other from moving through some of the same places, but the true breadth and depth of our relationship is encompassed in offering a brief nod when we pass on the street.

This version of church community presents a steep challenge for us because in a family of faith where the relationships are so surface, we forget that the Christian community has a deep stake in matters of brokenness and reconciliation.

In the Outline of the Faith in our Book of Common Prayer we read the question: What is the mission of the Church? And the Answer is: The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and *each other* in Christ.

In fact, our reconciliation with one another as members of the same family of faith in matters of conflict is just as much our mission as our attempt to reconcile the world to Christ. It is just as much our mission because we cannot do for the world what we cannot do for and among ourselves.

So I will just admit that our modern, western European version of Church makes this process not only scary and uncomfortable, but almost downright impossible. This is true not only because the whole process as outlined seems potentially excruciating, but because we actually have no concept or understanding of the importance of our faith community the way Jesus and his followers did.

Jesus and his followers are part of a tightly connected communal culture. In this culture, not only is one's identity subordinate to that of the family, but also one's sole motivation is for the family and its well-being.

North American Christianity is over laden with individualism. Over the centuries we of European decent have altered the original Middle Eastern cultural expression of Christianity to conform to our individualistic values and practices.¹ We hear Jesus' words through this filter as though individualism is one of Jesus' foundational truths.

We talk about our *personal relationship* with God or our personal walk of faith. As Jesus is teaching he understands faith and relationship with God as only truly possible in a deeply caring community. Are we beloved of God as individuals---*absolutely!* I will get to that 1 lost sheep that Jesus is so fond of in just a minute! But is our *individual* relationship with God meant to be the reason we gather together every Sunday---*absolutely not.*

¹ Martin Brokenleg in *Preaching God's Transforming Justice*, Westminster John Knox, 422.

And should we continue to hold that view we will do so at our peril. Church historian Diana Butler Bass and others have indicated that the only place mainline American Christianity is growing is in multi-cultural churches²---churches that come together out of communal cultures with a communally based understanding of faith.

Okay—I will conclude my “Christ in Culture” dissertation and move on.

But the fact is, as we get back to the matter at hand, we all know deep conflicts arise in *every* church community.

Are conflicts arising here at St. Stephen's? Yes---because we are no different than *any* other church. There *has been* conflict in the past, there *is* conflict in the present, and there *will be* conflict in the future. Conflict in churches is not unique---what *is* unique is a sincere and *intentional* engagement with conflict when it arises.

As Tom Long says, “Church people, no matter how committed, are still people, and stormy weather is always a possible forecast!”³ And if we've been paying attention to all of Paul's letters that we read Sunday by Sunday we know that many of them contain stern admonishments about people behaving badly at church.

Why is this so? Well one obvious answer hinted at above is that people are people wherever you go and as such we bring all of our “people-ness” in with us as gather to form our family of faith. But interestingly, many studies have shown that people will exhibit more negative behaviors in their church community than in their professional or personal lives.

One theory is that people do not expect to be challenged for their negative behaviors in church and often this is revealed to be true---we church folk can feel very reticent and embarrassed to confront negative behaviors in our worshipping communities and often for the reasons I've already spoken of. We don't know each other well enough to take this risk.

But Jesus shows no such reticence. Both Jesus and Paul are clear that sustained negative behaviors by a member or members of a faith community can bring it to its knees and consume its life.

But in their response and guidance as to how we confront such problems we see that what is most required in these situations is the courage to be truth-tellers. To “tell the truth in love” as we hear it put these days is all about telling difficult truths with the *specific goal* of reconciliation.

Jesus is telling His disciples that they have to be committed to being truth-tellers. Truth-tellers are not about blaming or even being proven “right” in any given circumstance. Truth-telling is tender, arduous work and it requires great care.

Which brings me to what I think is another very interesting thing about what Jesus is saying today about life in a family of faith---Jesus naturally *assumes* that there WILL BE conflict in the family. Conflict is not to be avoided---“I have come not to bring peace, but a sword” he tells us elsewhere in the gospels.

In a healthy family of faith, when the family is working “right” we learn and grow in trust and love as a result of conflict. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “A healthy family (of faith) has a way of smoothing our rough edges by making us rub up against each other, like tumbling pebbles in a jar.”

She reminds us that learning to take the risk of being a truly committed to one another in this way is how we learn we can't have everything our own way. She says, “We learn to compromise, giving up some of the things we want so that other people can have some of the things they want. And while it is never easy, learning this give and take is part of learning how to be fully human.”⁴ So now we find ourselves at what is probably the most shocking point in this gospel. If the offender ultimately refuses to listen, they are in effect cast out of the community, in harsher religious terms, excommunicated.

How do we reconcile these painful words with Jesus' teaching that we are to love our enemies and that we are to do unto others as we would have them do to us? It is hard for us to comprehend but the fact *is* that Jesus' sees excommunication as an act of radical love not only for the community, but for the individual who refuses reconciliation.⁵

I do not think any of us believe that Jesus wants to throw anyone out of the faith family. This final desperate act is meant to help person who will not be reconciled to understand that he or she has become one of those stumbling blocks we heard about last week. Anyone who refuses reconciliation greatly impairs the Body of Christ.

Such a radical act is meant to hopefully break the cycle of carrying our resentments like a cancer because it is only the unwillingness to be reconciled that prevents restoration. No relationship can be healed without 2 willing parties.

But, if both want wholeness and restoration, more than pride on one side of this equation or retribution on the other, then true community has formed and we have truly loosed God's mercy and grace on earth as in heaven.

And finally I come back to that lost sheep I mention earlier. This morning we only receive a brief snippet of what is a long discourse on the endless cycle of God's unlimited forgiveness and Christ's love for that one lost sheep.

This difficult teaching is held gently between Jesus' dogged determination to leave the 99 that are safe to seek out and find that one that is lost and then a treatise on our participation in the endless cycle of God's forgiveness.

² Keynote Address at the Diocese of San Diego Clergy Conference, 2009.

³ Tom Long in “Matthew”, Westminster Bible Companion, 209.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, 58-59.

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, “Matthew” in the *Brazos Theological Commentary*, 118.

In the end you see, the gospel calls us to focus not on our brokenness, but on God's love. And we are to be zealous in creating a family of truth-tellers and reconcilers; a family so strong that we cannot ever be divided.

What a feast for our hunger for belonging and community that would be. Do we---all of us who gather here as the family of St. Stephen's---do we dare to love and trust one another this much? Do we risk knowing and caring for each other beyond a nodding acquaintance?

I've been here almost two years and I can testify that I think we have made a good start. So now I am going to issue a challenge and an invitation...What do you say that we grab hold of the upcoming year before us and take the chance of going all the way---of becoming a community with a much deeper connectedness.

This year your Vestry and I have made growing into closer community our primary focus. We are still attending to the budget, the properties and all of the things that vestries do---that work is always before us. But the vitality of all of those things is born and grows stronger only as we form deeper bonds with one another and the mission we share as a family of faith. The upcoming Newcomer program, the All Parish Potlucks, the various Commissionings for our ministries, the birthday and anniversary announcements, our Stewardship focus, Adult Forums, Wednesday Bible Studies, Rite 13 and J2A for our youth---all of it is designed with building community in mind. So look for every opportunity coming our way and let's be that strong, loving, vital family of faith which I am positive God is forming us to be! Amen and alleluia!
Amen.

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