

"Creating a Community of Grace"
Matt. 18:15-20

When we read Matthew's gospel it becomes clear that he doesn't have any naïve or romantic illusions about the *church*. He knows that the church isn't made up of a lot of really nice people who never disagree... or endlessly patient saints who think only sweet thoughts. In Matthew's church, people-- no matter how committed-- are still *people*.

Throughout the eighteenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus emphasizes the importance of Christian *community*. Speaking to his disciples, he lets them know that their faith is not a *private* matter. Their life in Christ is a *community* affair... something that happens when two or three or more of them are gathered together in his name. *That* is when he promises to be in their midst... and *not* when they're off by themselves feeling spiritual or righteous.

I think for the most part, North American Protestant Christianity has lost its sense of church discipline. Churches reflect the values of the prevailing *culture* more than we'd like to admit. Someone says something that hurts your feelings? Let it be "like water off a duck's back." Somebody hassles you? It's *their* problem-- not yours. *Forget* them. Write them off.

In our individualistic culture, Matthew's talk of church discipline sounds alien or intrusive to a lot of folk.. Some of us may want to reject or ignore Jesus' guidance on church discipline. Some may welcome these words and use them to justify moralistic, self-righteous behavior. Some take from them permission to be judgmental or controlling.

This kind of thinking is behind some of the churches' past *excesses*. During the Colonial period in America, it was common to set aside a time during the worship service for *censures*. Certain people would be called up before the congregation and confronted with their sins. Someone might be accused of gossip and idle chatter. Another might be accused of drinking strong spirits. If they admitted their grievous faults, the congregation then had to decide how these sinners should be punished. Was public censure enough? Or should they be excluded from community for a month? Or was permanent excommunication from the congregation the only appropriate consequence for a serious transgression?¹ Most of us wouldn't want to go back to this kind of practice.

While I was serving a church in western Pennsylvania I learned of cases in earlier times there when people had been "sessioned." In the church history narrative, I learned of one case in which a farmer's hay field needed to be mowed and brought in before the approaching storm hit, so he literally made hay while the sun was shining-- one Sunday. The session summoned him and called him to account for breaking the Sabbath. The *justification* for this kind of censure came directly out of the passage we heard today from Matthew.

So-- what do we do with what Jesus says about how we are to live together?

I believe we need to take it seriously. Jesus makes it clear that his followers *need* each other-- not only for *practical* reasons... but for *spiritual* ones as well. We need each other because two heads are better than one. We need each other because we can accomplish more

¹Susan R. Andrews, in a sermon published in *Lectionary Homiletics*, September 8, 2002, p. 11.

together than we can apart. In the church, we need each other like brothers and sisters need each other-- to remind ourselves that we belong to one family.

When families work right, they're God's way of teaching us important things-- like how to share... and how to work together... and how to take care of one another. The way Barbara Brown Taylor puts it,² a healthy family has a way of smoothing our rough edges by making us rub against each other, like tumbling pebbles in a jar. When we live with other people, we learn that we can't have everything our own way. We learn to compromise, giving up some of the things *we* want so that *other* people can have some of the things *they* want. We learn to make *sacrifices* for the good of the family and the community. It's never *easy*, learning this give and take. But it's an important part of learning how to be fully *human*.

Another thing that living in a family can teach you is how to *fight*-- especially if you have brothers and sisters to practice on. In families that work *right*, we learn how to fight *fairly*. And we also learn how to make up... how to resolve conflict... tolerate differences... and *forgive* each other for the mean or thoughtless or misguided things we sometimes do.

Unfortunately, a lot of people don't learn these things. Some of us learned the rule of SILENCE-- silence about anything unpleasant. Let's see how many of you can complete this rule I learned growing up: *If you can't say something nice-- [don't say anything at all.]*

If you have a problem with someone, keep it to yourself, because harmony-- even the *illusion* of harmony-- is the most important thing. More important than telling the *truth*. More important than your feelings. And more important than you. That's the lesson many families teach, because it's the lesson that's been passed down from one generation to the next.

So, what feels familiar to a lot of us is to just let a controversy slide. We pretend the conflict, the offense never happened. The problem is: it *did* happen.

On some level, we know better, don't we? We know that community is never built up when we "play nice" or when we try to sugarcoat conflict. Community is never served when we create factions... perpetuate gossip... or let anger and frustration fester. Community is never served when inappropriate and destructive behavior is not held accountable.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus lets us know that, in the CHRISTIAN family, when your brother or sister sins, you need to go and talk to about it. If that doesn't work, you need to keep going back-- taking other people with you next time. You need to do everything in your power to get your brother or sister back in the fold again.

The gospel lesson is trying to tell us that confrontation and truth-telling is a healthy part of community life. If we really love someone, we will hold them accountable. But we will also do everything in our power to continue to include them in the fellowship.

What's at stake here? In his book *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis paints a picture of HELL that's *haunting*, because it bears such resemblance to where many human beings *live*.

Lewis says that hell is like a vast, gray city... a city inhabited only at its outer edges, with rows and rows of empty houses in the middle. Empty because everyone who once lived in them has quarreled with the neighbors and moved... and quarreled with the new neighbors and moved again, leaving empty streets full of empty houses behind them. That's how hell got so BIG, he says. Empty at the center... and inhabited only on the fringes. Because everyone in it chose DISTANCE instead of CONFRONTATION as the solution to a fight.

²Barbara Brown Taylor, "Family Fights" in *The Seeds of Heaven* (Forward Movement Publications, 1990), p. 58

By CONFRONTATION, I mean just what the dictionary says: to bring two people face to face... front to front... to sort out what's going on between them. That's what this morning's gospel lesson recommends. And it's what many of us what do just about anything to *avoid*.

We can come up with all kinds of *excuses*. Who am I to *judge*? What is it to me? Me go to her? She's the sinner-- let her come to me. Tell him my feelings are hurt? What if he just hurts them again? I wouldn't know what to say. I'd feel so foolish. And what's the use, anyhow? Things will never change.

Those are all fine excuses, if you don't mind living on the outskirts of HELL. But for those of us who are called to Christian community, they just won't do.

For us, there's something more important than being right or wrong, and that something is keeping the family together.

Nobody said this was *easy*!

I don't know about you, but for me the hardest part of this passage is when we hear that if reconciliation can't be worked out within the gathered church, then we should treat the transgressor like a tax-collector or a Gentile. What does that mean?

The *context* is important. Right before this in Matthew 18 is the story about the lost sheep, the one where Jesus the Good Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep that are safely in the fold in order to go and look for the one lost lamb. All of Jesus' attention is focused on the one who has strayed from the flock. Immediately *following* today's lesson is Peter's question about forgiveness. How many times, Lord, should I forgive my brother?

How many times do I have to forgive? Seventy-seven times? As many as it takes to get him back into the community. Today's gospel lesson is enfolded by examples of compassion and forgiveness. Knowing the *context* helps us to see that the point of community confrontation is not *judgment*-- but *restoration* and *reconciliation*.³

Some have interpreted the statement about treating someone like a tax-collector or a Gentile to mean rejection and punishment. But we need to remember that Jesus never treated tax-collectors and Gentiles with contempt. Rather, Jesus loved, included, and transformed the outcasts of society. Remember Zacchaeus, the tax collector? The Samaritan woman caught in adultery? The Roman centurion whose little girl was so sick? And what about Matthew himself, who was a tax-collector when Jesus called him to be a disciple. How did Jesus treat tax-collectors and Gentiles? He called them... touched them... ate with them... and loved them. Jesus never accepted sin, but always loved the sinner.

The bottom line of today's gospel lesson is simple: In Christian community we live in a tension between individual accountability to the standards of Christian community... and inexhaustible compassion to all who share in our community life.

As I said, this isn't *easy*! In some ways, it can be a real *nuisance* to belong to a family. It would be so much easier if we were just a bunch of individuals, loosely bound by similar beliefs... but whose affairs remained an essentially private matter, between us and God.

But according to Jesus, our life *together* is the chief means God has chosen for being with us... and it is of ultimate importance to God. Our life together is the place where we are comforted... confronted... tested... and redeemed by God, through one another. It's the place

³I am indebted to Susan Andrews for this insight, in *Lectionary Homiletics*, September 8, 2002, p. 12.

where we come to know God... or to flee from God's presence-- depending upon how we come to know or flee from one another.

When someone crosses us, we're called to be the *first* to reach out-- even when we're the ones who have been hurt... even when God knows we have done nothing wrong. Even when everything in us wants to fight back... or punish the one who has hurt us by distancing ourself. Still we are called to community with one another, to act like the FAMILY we are.

As the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Godself, not counting their trespasses against them, but entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."⁴

The *Cotton Patch Version* of the Bible puts it another way: "God was in Christ putting his arms around the world and hugging it to himself."

As a Christian community, we are called to honor Christ's presence by stretching out our arms toward one another in love.

The good news is that we don't have to do it alone. Christ promises us that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there, in the midst of them."

Thanks be to God!

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⁴2 Cor. 5