

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Reality Church”

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Matthew 18: 15-20

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.'

Romans 13: 8-14

8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

11 Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Preacher William Willimon remembers a church from his boyhood days in South Carolina. Actually he remembers the decaying, rotting shell of a building that had once been a church. The windows were gone. The front door stood open to the wind and rain. Thick, green vine covered parts of the broken roof. “What happened to that church?” he asked his grandmother one day. “What happened to all of the people who went to that church?” His grandmother laughed and began the story. “That was a very active church. I remember it well when I was a girl. There used to be services there every Sunday, picnics in the spring and fall, and then they had their great ‘falling out’. Mr. Jones, or maybe it was Mr. Johnson, wanted to pave the drive into the church. Some of them thought it was a waste of money. They said that Mr. Jones or Mr. Johnson, whoever it was, was trying to take over the church. You can see today that the drive was never paved. After that fight, the church split. One group went and took what it had and left. A few of them stayed, tried to keep the church going for a while. Eventually, they just died off or moved away and what you see is the end of the argument.” I think of Willimon’s grandmother’s story each time I pass by an old now-abandoned church. I wonder what happened to bring it to its end.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offered some very specific directives on how his followers were to respond to those who do us wrong. Against all logic and emotion, we are told to turn our cheek, to carry their burden, or to walk the extra mile to understand those who have hurt us. In today's gospel lesson, Jesus gives some rather specific advice on how we are to behave in church. It is interesting that Jesus uses the word "church" because the church probably wasn't around until many years after his ministry on earth. This probably means these were not really Jesus' words but an interpretation of Jesus' teachings, written by the author of Matthew, which spoke to the reality of the situation for the early Christian church. It was obvious that it didn't take long for the Body of Christ composed of real and flawed people to begin to argue and fight. After all, the church is a group of ordinary men and women trying to get along together, serving God's intention but with all of the weaknesses and blemishes of any human gathering.

Evidently the early church was convinced that rifts among the fellowship were deadly. Disagreements between people were too important to be ignored. Reconciliation was too crucial to be left to chance. Jesus, the gospel teaches, demands that we practice the manner of the Kingdom of God right here on earth. He offers us practical advice on how to respond when someone in the church offends us. He gives a clear way to settle church disputes. He seems to indicate that even the bickering and squabbles of the community of faith are fertile fields where we as his followers are supposed to be doing the work of God.

Perhaps these words surprise us. After all this is the church. We are supposed to be the body of Christ, salt of the earth, and light of the world. I know of some people who upon joining a church believe that they are now part of a community where everyone is good and kind and loving and where no one ever gossips or spreads rumors or disagrees on any subject. All it takes is serving on one board or committee or doing one job and they discover the truth. Pride and power have a way of creeping into the life of the church. Preacher Henry Ward Beecher once said, "I don't need John Calvin to tell me about total depravity, I have my own congregation to show me that!"

I am guilty of wanting things to be different than reality. I resent arguments and resentments that keep the church from being what it could be. I often think to myself, "If we could only get beyond all of the disagreements and turf wars and get on with the real business of the church!" But that is a rather "pie-in-the-sky" attitude. I do not like conflict. I would rather avoid than confront and persuade rather than convict. The easier road is to sweep differences under the rug, put on a happy face and carry on. But today in this lesson, Jesus teaches us that getting along with each other and working our way through disagreements in a Christ-like way is the reality of the church. Jesus commands us to confront one another in love, to work together toward reconciliation, to admit our wrongs, to seek forgiveness and to forgive, to support one another despite our shortcomings and our failures.

Now it may seem as if Jesus is opening up a huge can of worms here. Confronting one another? Speaking the truth? We might think there is already too much of that going on. And we all know some people who are better at confrontation than others. I recall the relationship of the playwright George Bernard Shaw and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Shaw sent two tickets to Churchill for the opening night of a play he had written. His note to Churchill said, "One ticket is for you, the other for a friend-if you have one." Churchill sent a return note saying that he could not attend on opening night. Instead he asked for tickets for the second night, "that is, if there is to be a second night." I think we have all experienced people who seem to delight in the opportunity to confront another. I don't think this kind of confrontation is what Jesus had in mind though.

Jesus also knew that many of us are prone to silently seethe in our pain. He knew that we would be more likely to wait for an opportunity for revenge. He knew that it would be just like us to slink away in anger and leave the fellowship.

And so he had some suggestions. Jesus spoke of straight talk with those with whom we disagree. Speak the truth, but in love. He supported dealing directly with the person. Don't talk behind their back. Don't wait and complain about it in the parking lot after the meeting. Don't unfriend them on Facebook. Don't withdraw from activities in which they are a part. Don't avoid them on Sundays, and then just quietly leave the church. If a brother or sister offends you, angers you, or saddens you, talk to them directly. But do so in a way filled with grace, with mercy, and with forgiveness. Do it quietly. And listen; don't expect to do all the talking. Listening also can lead to understanding. Speak with others seeking reconciliation, not merely the achievement of your own wishes and desires, and certainly not as a way of building yourself up by putting another down.

Jesus went on. If such loving talk doesn't work, it is time to get others involved. Try to reconcile using a few wise, patient, and loving friends in the process. If that doesn't work, the gospel says that we should be done with the offender. We should show them the door. Now I have real trouble with that. It really doesn't sound like Jesus, does it? Perhaps that was just the early church's advice, words written long after Jesus' original message. I prefer to think that Jesus would have really said to remember grace and to always extend it, even in conflict. Let your actions and your words keep the door of the possibility of reconciliation always open.

In an interview with Bill Moyers, author Malcolm Muggeridge said, "Though this life at times seems like the theater of the absurd, there is a point where you realize that there is a reality, that there's something going on here which is real.....in existing we fulfill the purpose of our creator which is a loving purpose, not a maligning purpose, a creative purpose, not a destructive purpose, an eternal purpose, not a temporal one."

It seems to me that those words express certain wisdom about Jesus' teaching this morning. In our attempts to speak the truth in love with each other, in our efforts to bridge our differences with one another, in our task of living with others in the community of faith, you and I mirror in small ways what is ultimate reality- what God has already done for us. Here in the church, in our loving words that express our differences, in our expression of our hurt that offers the gift of forgiveness and implies our need for forgiveness, in our speaking that involves listening, and in our confrontation of wrong that is honest about our own wrong, we are the face of God. As William Willimon writes, "we are the dress rehearsal for what is going on always in heaven. When we forgive, when we refuse to ignore wrong that has been done, when we humbly confess the wrong we have done and ask to be forgiven, here in our church we become a corner of heaven." That is reality.