

A COMMUNITY OF FORGIVENESS

Matthew 18: 15-20

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University Church of Chicago

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She was the town gossip, a small, bird-like creature who scurried around to the local café, the grocery store, the hardware store every day, gathering information and dispensing it, in the village where I was the pastor in Oklahoma many years ago. She knew everything about everybody and told all that she knew. Such folks, I have discovered, invariably have the gift of incredulity, so that friends and neighbors unwittingly tell them things they do not intend to tell them. They know the gossip will repeat it, but they hope she or he will modify the story or make it more palatable as it is repeated.

So, as a young, naïve pastor who was concerned about the moral and spiritual life of my congregation, I preached a sermon directed singly, solely at the town gossip. I looked up all the Scripture references concerning truth-telling, speech, bearing false witness, etc. and looked straight at her as I preached my fiery sermon against gossiping.

At the conclusion of the service, she came out of church, shook my hand firmly, and declared, “Oh, preacher, I wish my neighbor could have heard that sermon!”

Never since then, I can assure you, have I preached a sermon directed at only one person in the congregation. Before I preach each Sunday, I pray Harry Emerson Fosdick’s little prayer, “Oh, God, help me bowl down one person’s alley today.” A sermon should be based on Scripture, should declare the Word of God, and should be open to every possibility.

Still, when we hear these words from Matthew about conflict in the church, they seem to be directed toward you and me, don’t they?

In order to understand today’s lection, it is necessary to realize that these teachings are addressed to the church which came into being after Easter. The sayings presuppose the existence of congregations that gather at times to handle disputes among their members. They speak to a very common problem of offenses among Christians.

Here as in the Sermon on the Mount the instructions are addressed to the victims: “If your brother (or sister) sins against you” (v. 15). The offended person is to take the initiative. There is no room in the teaching of Jesus for sitting around, licking your wounds, and sighing, “Poor me.” One cannot always avoid being the victim, but one can avoid the victim mentality.

When you find yourself offended by a member of the faith community, Our Lord’s principle action you take is based on respect—both for the offender and the church. The matter, therefore, is settled privately, if possible, and if not, in the presence of “one or two others” (v. 16).

Paul called upon congregations to discipline members (I Cor. 5-6; II Cor. 2:5-8), but the history of the procedure is not one of unambiguous success. It often is a case of pulling up the wheat with the tares. Matthew is assuming a small gathering of Christians pure in motive and objective in judgment. Not all congregations can be so described.

Look. Let's face it, disputes do arise among believers, and it is important that the problems be addressed directly, as privately as possible, but always with care and respect.

Here's the heart of the matter, dear friends: the church must always be engaged, in the words of Jurgen Moltmann, in a "dialectic of reconciliation." We as members of the church do not act on our own initiative or according to our own criteria. We are those who live with act upon the forgiveness of Good Friday as well as the victory and power of Easter Sunday.

You and I pray the Lord's Prayer every Sunday (and, I suspect, many other times during the week), and we pray, "...forgive us our sins (trespasses, debts), **AS** we forgive those..." Without forgiveness of others, we block God's forgiveness. If we refuse to forgive, as Frederick Buechner as pointed out, we break the bridge that we ourselves must cross.

By including this passage, Matthew shows that he believes firm action must be taken against a serious offense. He is also aware, however, that those who undertake to correct their neighbors are liable to a sin themselves, a sin that can be described as spiritual arrogance in some instances, as judgmentalism in others, and occasionally as simple hypocrisy. He has already given special prominence to Jesus' injunction, "Judge not, that you be not judged" (7:1).

He therefore carefully frames this passage with the parables of the lost sheep and the unforgiving debtor, both of which dramatize the conviction that God's desire is that the sinner be saved, not condemned.

Jesus' method is usually to tell a story, a parable, to cast the truth in metaphorical terms. Thus, we do not hear the Good News. We overhear it. That's what Matthew is calling us to do in this periscope. Kierkegaard maintained that that is the only valid way to hear the Good News. Because the story of God's forgiveness and grace and governance are so overwhelming, we cannot hear the story directly. Instead, we overhear it. We listen to a form of what Kierkegaard called "indirect communication."

Kierkegaard's own ministry began in a cemetery in Copenhagen. He had come there when "...the evening was approaching. And the evening's farewell to the day, to whom who has lived the day, is a speech of mysterious meanings." He thinks he is alone until suddenly he overhears on the other side of a stone wall a conversation between an aged man and a little child standing at a fresh grave. The old man in deep grief laments over his departed son, the father of the child who listens to the grandfather. The departed son, infected with the world's wisdom, had forsaken the faith. With intense sadness the old man addresses himself to the child who hardly understands his words but is therefore no less profoundly moved:

He told him that there was a wisdom which tried to fly beyond faith, that on the other side of faith there was a wide stretch of country like the blue mountains, an illusory land, which to a mortal eye might appear to yield a certainty higher than that of faith; but the believer feared this mirage, as the sailor fears a similar appearance on the seas; that it was an illusion of eternity in which a mortal cannot live, but only lose his faith when he permits his gaze to be fascinated by the sight.

So the old man exacts from the boy the promise that he will hold fast to his faith in Jesus Christ and that he will not permit himself to be deceived by any illusion, no matter how the face of the world might change.

We come to worship to overhear the Good News, to apprehend the grace contained therein, and to be called to lives of service and compassion and truth.