

“Unity and Healthy Boundaries” GPPC 8-12-18
Ephesians 4:1-6, Matthew 18:15-20

Before worship a couple of Sundays ago, one of our church members, (and a good friend) caught me in the hallway outside the church office. She gave me a serious look and said, “Do you have a minute to talk?” “Um, sure,” I said, imagining some sort of terrible news. So we walked into the outer office and stood beside our Church Administrator’s desk. Again, she fixed me with a serious look and then asked, “Are we okay?” “What?” “Are we okay?” “Of course,” I said “What are you talking about?” She was calm and explained. And it turned out that on one Sunday morning I’d seen my friend in the hallway before worship, and I was in a rush, and instead of giving her a hug and a smarty pants comment, I’d just zoomed by with hardly a greeting, much less a devastatingly clever insult. So she thought maybe I was upset about something. Of course, I apologized and gave her a hug and explained that I meant no offense; Sunday mornings are typically hectic and that was all. Still, I wished I had been more hospitable the first time.

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But it really struck me *how* this church member dealt with something that offended her. She could've gone and complained to twenty of her best friends. She could've stayed home from church and pouted. She could've even decided to up the ante and be intentionally rude to me the next time she saw me. So many nasty options and so little time. But she chose none of them. Instead, she followed what Jesus teaches us about church conflict--a step by step process for constructive conflict management in the church.

Jesus says, "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."

Notice a few things right away. Jesus assumes that sometimes people in the church will indeed sin against each other; they will say and do things that hurt other members. We wish that were not true, but if you're involved in the church long enough and deeply enough, there's a decent chance you're going to get hurt and it's possible you're going to say or do something to hurt somebody else.

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Why? Because we are not robots. We are diverse people with different backgrounds, and wide-ranging ideas about the world, the church, and how things ought to be done. We see things differently and want to do things differently. So we sometimes bump into each other.

But getting hurt and hurting others also comes from our sinfulness and finitude. We're imperfect people who hurt other imperfect people who then sometimes hurt us back. We hope that the hurts are not too deep, and they heal quickly and completely. As disciples of Christ, many times we can simply practice patience instead of being prickly. We can decide not to get ourselves sucked into drama and instead be about what Ephesians calls "bearing with one another in love," putting up with each other and our differences with laughter and love.

But sometimes a hurt or offense is too deep or too repeated simply to let it go, right? In fact, one biblical scholar says the situation described here in Matthew is not about something minor. (Otherwise it wouldn't end with the whole church involved.) Rather it's about "serious offenses that affect the spiritual health of the congregation as a whole."

(Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, 213.)

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Note that when an offense occurs there is a process for resolution. And when an offense occurs in the church who does Jesus say is responsible for trying to mend the relationship, the offender or the offended? The offended. As unfair as it may seem, Jesus says the offended party needs to take action.

Why? Well the offender might not even know he or she has hurt the other person, or might not know how deeply the other person has been hurt. So the offended party needs to take action.

Now that does not mean that the offender is off the hook. If you know you've treated someone wrongly you ought to go apologize and try to make things right. But if that hasn't happened, according to Jesus the *offended* party has the responsibility to go and meet with the offender one on one.

Why one on one? Probably to avoid embarrassing the offender. And meeting one on one also creates clarity. There's no second or third party gossiping or going to the offender with the news that, "Some people are upset...Some people are saying..." Nope. Jesus tells us to talk face to face. No fire-breathing letters or poison-tipped emails. He

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says talk face to face. Meanwhile, scientists tell us that a good percentage of our communication is non-verbal—body language and facial expression. So face to face conversation gives us the best chance for clarity from both sides in a disagreement.

Also notice the intention of the face to face meeting. Jesus says, “If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.” So the intention of the meeting is not to attack the offender; it’s to restore the offender’s relationship within the larger faith community.

Now sometimes people will say, “Well, I went and talked to so and so. But he wouldn’t listen.” So it’s important that we make a distinction here. Jesus is *not* saying we have to agree about every issue in the faith community. “I went and talked to so and so about, (gun control, immigration reform, torture, death penalty, you name the issue) but he just wouldn’t listen.” In other words, “He didn’t change his mind and believe what I believe and he wouldn’t say what I say. So the whole meeting was a waste of time.”

That’s not what Jesus is saying here. No. Jesus is talking about people actually “sinning” against each other, hurting another member of

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the church. That is very different from somebody simply saying something you disagree with. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, “Let me never fall into the vulgar mistake of dreaming that I am persecuted whenever I am contradicted.”

But does talking face to face with someone in the church who has hurt you make you nervous? It makes me nervous. I don't really want to do it. But please understand this is the path Jesus leaves for us--face to face dialogue. Not private grumbling. Not gossiping. Not abandoning church. If we've been hurt and we can't just forgive and move on, then face to face dialogue is what disciples of Jesus are called to do. It's not easy, but it's also a kind of constructive conflict management that the church can model for the world. And the good news is that it's not something ultimately we have to do all by ourselves.

Let's say you tried the face to face meeting and it was not successful in restoring relationship. What next? Jesus says try again and bring along one or two others, not to gang up on the person but to serve as witnesses. And, of course, sometimes the people who come along can help people to listen to each other.

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Well, what if that doesn't work? Jesus says we are to "tell it to the church." And, of course, it's hard to imagine dragging more than 400 people in here to talk about a conflict. But as Presbyterians we do indeed have processes for dealing with serious conflict, and they involve bringing in larger groups and greater representation than three or four people. And, again, the goal is not to "win" or to punish. It's to restore the relationship of the offender with the larger church.

And what if that doesn't work? Jesus says we are to treat the offender like "a Gentile and a tax collector." This can be interpreted in more than one way.

One way is simply to say to offenders, "You choose not to act as a member of the faith community by observing appropriate healthy boundaries. Okay. We will honor your choice and accept that you wish not to be part of the group." Maybe that sounds harsh. But that's one way some churches interpret this passage as a way of balancing the need to care for individuals and the need to protect the community.

But another way of interpreting the passage is to say to offenders (figuratively), "We will treat you as 'a Gentile and a tax collector'

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alright, but Jesus loved Gentiles and tax collectors. And we will love you and hope to bring you back into the fold at some point. We will give you space, but we will not give up on you, because God does not give up on anyone.”

The whole process that Jesus outlines takes persistence, courage, and a lot of work, but then again, those are all elements of love, aren't they?

Another pastor says, “At lunch with several work colleagues, I said a careless word about another minister. After returning from lunch, one of my lunch mates came to my office and confronted me. His coming to see me, one on one, was an act of Christian maturity. He risked my response because he cared enough about me to push me toward more careful speech. His response to me could not have been easy for him. He used conflict as a way to build me up, not tear me down. If he had gone to someone else's office that afternoon and talked about me and taken the easy course, his actions would have diminished me in the same way that my carelessness diminished our mutual friend. His mature response modeled the principle of this passage. By speaking truth, containing the

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conflict, and loving me enough to confront me, he strengthened the body of Christ rather than eroding it.” (Dock Hollingsworth in *Feasting on the Gospels:*

Matthew, Chapters 14-28, Vol. 2, 94.)

Sometimes it’s hard being in community with all these ornery, flawed people, including their pastors, isn’t it? Of course, the only thing harder than ornery, flawed community is not being in community at all.

The writer of Ephesians challenges us, “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

This week let’s spend some time reflecting upon our lives. Are we grouches just waiting for the next thing to be mad about and hold a grudge about? Or are we living our calling--humble, gentle, and patient? Have we hurt somebody in this congregation and we need to go and try to make things right? Or have we been hurt by somebody in this congregation and we need to go and have honest, face to face, loving dialogue about what has happened?

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A stronger community of faith is possible for our church, as it is for all churches, and it begins with the committed, courageous, and persistent words and actions of each one of us. Through Christ our Lord.

Amen. ©Jeff Paschal