

Pentecost 15, September 10, 2023 First Congregational UCC, Appleton

Scripture Reading Matthew 18:15-20 from "The Message"

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ "If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him – work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend. If he won't listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. If he still won't listen, tell the church. If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love.

¹⁸⁻²⁰ "Take this most seriously: A yes on earth is yes in heaven; a no on earth is no in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this. When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action. And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I'll be there."

MESSAGE "Need Some Help?"

Pastor Mary Jo Laabs

Please pray with me: Holy One of many names, thank you for being here yesterday. Thank you for joining us in this time and in this place today. Thank you for being out there wherever we will be tomorrow. Whether we are alone or with one or two or more of your beloved children; whether we are on this plot of land where a building made of brick stands on the holy ground that was the home, hunting, gathering, and farming land of the First Peoples of this territory; Whether we are traveling the streets of this city or taking one more trip into the WI campgrounds and parks; whether we are in our homes, or a visitor in someone else's ...where ever we are...you are there with us. Thank you for letting your presence be known. We pray that our words, our intentions, our actions will always reflect our commitment to being what WE refer to as US, the *belongers* in this community of your faithful people. WE pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

There is no better story than this as an illustration for this morning's scripture. I have shared it here about six months ago...it bears repeating today.

Once upon a time, two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in their 40 years of working together. It began with a small misunderstanding, and grew into a major difference, and finally exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence.

One morning, there was a knock on John's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days' work," he said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there that I could help with?"

Yes," said John. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my younger brother's farm! Last week, there was a meadow between us, but he took his bulldozer and dug a small river between us. Well, I'm going to do him one better. See that pile of old lumber? I want you to build an 8-foot fence between us. Then I won't have to look at his place or his face anymore." The carpenter said, "Show me the nails and the tools, and I'll do a good job for you."

The older brother had to go to town, so he left for the day. At sunset, when he returned, his eyes opened wide, and his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. The carpenter had built a bridge that stretched from one side of the river to the other, with handrails and all! And his younger brother, was coming toward them, his hand outstretched. "You're quite the guy," he said, "after all I've said and done." The two brothers met in the middle, and shook each other's hands. They turned to see the carpenter leaving. "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother. "I'd love to," the carpenter said, "but I have many more bridges to build."

When you and I come to the end of our days, God won't ask what kind of car we drove, but He will ask how many people we helped get where they needed to go. He won't ask how big our house was, but He will

ask how many people we welcomed into our home. God won't ask what neighborhood we lived in, but He will ask how we treated our neighbors. And He won't ask how many fences we made, but He will ask how many bridges we built. -Bob Tasler, Restoration: Confronting the Brother

Need some help building a bridge? Look around. Well, if you do not want to “look”...then, as the well-known scholar, *Big Bird* of Sesame Street, once said, “Walk backwards in your mind.”

Maybe it has happened to you inside the walls of the church or out in what a colleague of mine calls, the “public church:” the grocery store, the post office, the Zoom meeting, the Y, in your classroom or at the Dr’s office. There have been circumstances when life has taught us what we can talk about and what it is... that we need to keep to ourselves. We eventually learn when we shouldn’t tell each other *exactly* what we’re thinking and when we certainly should not to throw the “first stone.” But, life just gets messy. Relationships break up: in families, in faith communities, in the workplace. God’s still-speaking voice inside tells us we need to find some one who we can talk to and where to go to when we need help.

The scripture this morning gives us a plan to fix and eliminate interpersonal hostilities. Does anyone here *need some help* building a bridge between yourself and someone you know? My guess is that if we took a vote on this, there would be more of us who would say that the plan that Jesus puts before us seems impossible, than those who would say, “It’s easy.”

It is not the only time in the Bible that Jesus approaches the subject of relationships and forgiving one another...and while he talks about it, he lives it. In this eighteenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus admits that his disciples are going to have conflicts and give specific directions as to how to resolve them. Earlier, in his “Sermon on the Mount,” Matthew Ch 5:23, Jesus said, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift..."

Jesus might be telling us that who is right is not as important as is maintaining communication. Why can’t we trust that to be true? Need some help with this?

Try this:

I. First, Jesus tells us that if anyone has wronged us, we should immediately put our complaint into words. One of the biggest mistakes we can make is not to *voice our hurt*. To just brood about it can poison our whole life until we can’t think of anything else but our own hurt. Jesus knew that. He said, “**get it out in the open.**” And then he adds, "If they listen to you, you have gained them. Remembering that we all make mistakes, and that as God has forgiven us, we too need to offer our forgiveness. That is what Jesus Christ would have us do.

II. The second step is to take someone with you. In the NRSV, these are the words of Jesus: "But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses." **You don’t take others along to prove wrongdoing, but rather to help the reconciliation.** It sometimes is so difficult to do ourselves, that we just can’t **say or do** the right thing to resolve a conflict. Maybe you can think of someone you would ask to come with you... Jesus calls them “peacemakers.”

III. The third step - according to Jesus - is, **if all that fails**, we must take our troubles to the church. I must admit that I don’t fully understand what Jesus is saying to us with these words, but I do know that when WE work together, pray together, laugh together and shed tears together, the burdens are lighter, the joy is fuller.

IV. The fourth part of the plan is "... if he refuses to listen even to the church..." This is the part where we say, OH NO WE WON’T. I compared different translations of the Bible...(Matthew 18:17). NRSV: "... if he refuses to listen even to the church..." let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." KJV: and if he refuses to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican.

NIV: “if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector..”
The Living Bible: “¹⁷ If he still refuses to listen, then take your case to the church, and if the church’s verdict favors you, but he won’t accept it, then the church should excommunicate him.”

I like, **The Message** interpretation best: “If he won’t listen to the church, you’ll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God’s forgiving love.”

The first impression here is to give up and treat the person as hopeless and abandon him or her.

However, Jesus never set limits to human forgiveness. Remember what he told Peter?

“We must forgive seventy times seven.”

What stands out to me is that this uncomfortable piece of instructions that Jesus is putting this before us today, should have our names written in it! WE, as Christians, have been given the tools to **resolve conflicts as no other fellowship can**. Jesus tells us that he will help us in our relationships. **He says, “OK, calm down...take a breath... Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there with you.”**

Some ideas from: When Christians Quarrel: Resolving Conflict in the Church
Sermon by Jerry L. Schmalenberger Matthew 18:15-20

In reading this scripture several times and in different versions of the Bible, it finally occurred to me that these words of Jesus are not in parable form...he is not telling us a story so that we can listen and learn how it applies to our lives. These words fit in the category of the mandates: “Whenever you eat the bread or drink the cup, remember me.” “Love one another as I have loved you.” And: The Message, ¹⁸⁻²⁰ “Take this most seriously: A yes on earth is yes in heaven; a no on earth is no in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this. When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action. And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I’ll be there.”

This is not just **an opportunity** that Jesus sets before us...He didn’t say, “sign up if you want to have a good experience.” There is much power in a church that is united in loving God and loving one another inside of these walls and loving our neighbors and loving God when wherever we go. **Today, we have learned a lesson in just one more way to say, “I love you.”**

One final thought. Even though some think that the phrase, “**What would Jesus do?**” that became popular in the early 1900s is flimsy theology for *we who say that we are Christians...* (after the widely read book *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* by Charles Sheldon.) it reminds us of our belief in a moral imperative to live in such a way that we demonstrate the love of Jesus through our actions. If we truly believe and never forget that, “Where two or more are gathered, there I am with you” would we belittle our colleagues; would we be discriminatory of others because of their race, religion, or gender identity; would we... you fill in the blank. I believe the answer is “NO, of course not.” Because Jesus would not do that.

"Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love...."

Blest be that **bridge that will be built between us just when we need it**

...and blest be our walking across it...

We are in this together. Need some help? Thanks be to God that we can do these hard things! Amen.

BENEDICTION Pastor Mary Jo Laabs

Go now and remember that WE do not go alone...WE go with God to share God’s love..

The blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer and Comforter is with us.

Pastor Mary Jo

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