

¹⁵“If your brother or sister sins, [or sins against you] go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

¹⁸“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

¹⁹“Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

Matthew 5:21-26

²³“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵“Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.

²⁶Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

PRAY

We've been learning about peacemaking in a world of conflict, and today we are looking at peacemaking right here in the church.

For some reason our nine-year-old granddaughter has recently taken a liking to the movie *Castaway*. I don't know what it is about the movie that appeals to her... The plot of the movie revolves around Tom Hanks who portrays a Fed Ex executive who is called away to deal with some issues in Malaysia. En-route, his plane crashes in the ocean; he finds himself alone on a deserted South Pacific island. His only companion? A volleyball named Wilson (what else?!). Eventually, 4 years later, he is picked up by a passing vessel and returns home only to discover that everyone, including his finance have moved on without him.

The point? **The only place one would never experience conflict is living alone on a deserted island!**

We don't live there. We live life in a social context, with other people. Given that, it is only a matter of time (usually a very short time) before we have a disagreement, an argument, a falling out, a difference of opinion, a fight, “a knock-down-drag-out”, whatever you want to call it! To think this does not happen in a family, or a church family, is to be in denial.

Jesus saw it and named it. Jesus, who wants his followers to foster and thrive in a community of grace, has some very specific instructions for us. This is not a parable. This is not a story from which we can draw a moral. No. Right here, Jesus says, If this happens, then do this. This is how to deal with it. Jesus is thoughtful, and very specific. Jesus tells us this for our own good!

Consider the context. This chapter Jesus is talking about greatness, and he points to a little child. In Mark 10:35-46, a similar conversation begins with the disciples--James and John, the Zebedee boys--asking Jesus who will sit at his right and left, when he comes into his Kingdom. In other words, they want to know who will be Vice President, and who will be Secretary of State when Jesus becomes President! Their concern? Status and power. There's only so much room at the top, you know, and they want to get their spots reserved! The rest of the disciples are not much better, as when they get wind of this, they become indignant and resentful! Wait a minute, guys, move over!!! It's a power grab, plain and simple!

Jesus puts them and us in our place when he says the greatest of all is the servant of all. Oops. Instead of climbing the ladder of success/status, Jesus asks: How low can you go to be the lowest, greatest servant of all?

Then the final story in this chapter moves to a parable about the unforgiving servant--and the issue here is money, and debt repayment. We never fight about money do we?? (Later in our cong. Meeting, a new budget will be presented. We'll see!) Jesus is really messing with us, isn't he? He knows right where it hurts! Right in that tender spot where we know we are forgiven by God, but we just can't see it through to sharing that same gracious spirit with our brother or sister, especially when it comes to power and money!!

Sandwiched in between Jesus' commentary on power and money and debt repayment, is what Jesus has to say about conflict in the family of God. Why should this family of faith be any different than our own families?

Jesus gives some very specific guidelines for addressing conflict within the body of Christ.

He begins by saying: If your brother or sister sins, [or sins against you]. Hold it right there! We don't like to admit that we are sinners. We likely prefer to think of ourselves as "mistakers". A mistake is a miscalculation, an error in action or judgement caused by poor reasoning. Carelessness. I just didn't have all the information. I didn't know any better. But the reality is that we are not merely "mistakers". The Bible does not say "while we were yet mistakers, Christ died for us." Nope. Whether we like it or not, we are sinners.

By definition, sin involves: "a willful or deliberate violation of a religious or moral principle." There are numerous words in NT Greek that are translated into English as "sin", but convey nuances of meaning. The one Jesus uses here (hamartia) means "to miss the mark". "Missing the mark may manifest itself as misguided beliefs and misdirected behavior. Miss the boat. Miss the ball. Miss the point. Misunderstand. Miss-communicate. Miss you. Miss!" (To Build a Community of Grace, R. J. Aguilar 9.4.11.)

Furthermore, my sin is not merely a private matter between me and God. It can become an issue of concern and potential damage not only to myself, to the larger community.

I served in a church where the choir director and organist—both married to other people, decided that God wanted them to be together. The impact of their sexual misconduct lead to the devastation of not only two families, but an entire church family as well! One person's individual sin always has a corporate impact!

Because of our sinfulness, we regularly and often, miss-understand/miss-communicate and miss the mark with one another. Sometimes it is a minor blip on the screen of life, but sometimes, it is something more significant.

Consider the experience of getting a splinter under one's skin. It is small but it is painful. It hurts. The act of digging it out and removing the splinter may be more painful still. However, the cost of NOT removing the splinter can lead to greater pain and suffering as it festers and becomes infected. If one ignores or delays action, something more drastic may be required to restore the health of the individual.

When we find ourselves in a situation such as Jesus describes, he instructs us to go—do not post anything on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, do not stop to complain to a third party—but go directly, and privately, and meet face to face, with the other. If our heart is made right through prayer, if what we are seeking is the healing of the relationship and not the opportunity to lay blame or guilt, one might start with a simple: “Can we talk?”

If the person agrees to meet, we may talk but we must also **listen**. As important as anything that is said, is what is heard. Words must be chosen carefully. Both parties bear responsibility for the misunderstanding, so blaming is out; mutual vulnerability is the order of the day.

What does listening involve?

How do I know that I have been heard?

Can the person who is listening, repeat back to me what I have said? (and vice versa?)

Have I made an equal effort to listen to and hear the other's point of view?

Have we been mutually respectful of one another's thoughts and feelings?

Jesus says if this one on one, private conversation does not yield fruit, then two witnesses from the community of grace are to be invited to meet with the two. The purpose of adding two additional “witnesses” is not to overpower or take sides, but rather to protect both parties. The witnesses represent the caring community. They are invited as another set of eyes and ears, to seek to understand the situation, and perhaps serve as mediators.

On occasion it is tempting to pretend that one does not have a splinter. Last summer our granddaughter was helping Rob with some gardening chores and she got a splinter in her hand, but she didn't tell us. She knew that the process of

removing it would hurt, so she pretended it wasn't there. Pretending does not make it so!

Sometimes we want to pretend the splinter doesn't exist too, because removing it hurts us too. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the rebuke that calls a sister or a brother back from the path of sin."

Doing or saying nothing, is not loving. It is tough love, costly love to call one another to account.

Dealing with the "splinter" or the sin, as Jesus instructs us to, is an act of love. If we are indeed, cultivating a community of grace, we will take the risk of loving truthfulness. Unless we live on a deserted island, sin is not a private matter, it impacts the entire community.

I heard about a church where the preacher and the choir director were not getting along. This began to spill over into the worship service.

One Sunday, the pastor preached on stewardship and the importance of giving a tithe to the Lord. The choir director sang the hymn, "Jesus Paid It All."

The next Sunday, the preacher's sermon was on the danger of gossiping and how we should pay close attention to the words we say. The choir director led the congregation in singing the hymn, "I Love To Tell The Story."

The next week the pastor's sermon was on taking action and serving within the community. The choir director followed it with the hymn: "Be Still My Soul".

The preacher became very disgusted over the situation, as it kept on for several months. Another Sunday he told the congregation he was considering resigning. The song leader sang the hymn, "What a Day That Will Be."

Finally, the preacher informed the congregation that it was he believed Jesus that led him there, and he was resigning, believing that Jesus that was leading him to another ministry.

At that, the choir director led them in singing: "What A Friend We Have in Jesus"! Let's get real and really honest...

One of the dangers of being a part of this "Christian" family is that we are too "nice". We confuse being "nice" with being Christ-like. Jesus was not afraid to offend someone when he spoke the truth in love.

We would too easily trade the hard work of honest interchange for initial silence, and instead have the 'meeting after the meeting' in the church parking lot. Gossip and subterfuge endanger our relationships with one another and undermine the unity that God desires for us. Unity does not mean unanimity. It does not mean that we will always agree. What we need to value more than our own comfort, is creating a graceful space where we value one another enough to do the hard work of dealing directly with disagreements and hurt feelings in the manner Jesus prescribes.

Most of us avoid conflict, right? We'd prefer avoidance, but avoidance exacts a high price. Literally. Research has revealed that employees who avoid crucial conversations (in an attempt to avoid potential conflict), waste an average of \$1500. and an 8 hour work day for every one conversation they avoid. (B. Maxfield, "Cost of Conflict: Why silence is killing your bottom line," Vitalismarts 4.6.10)

In Chinese, the symbol for "crisis" is identical to the symbol for "opportunity". We have repeated opportunities to be authentic, gracious disciples of Jesus, in how we relate to one another.

In Matthew 5, (part of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount"), Jesus addresses and interprets the 6th commandment: "Thou shall not murder". He says in v. 23-24: ²³*"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift."*

Notice that the context is coming to worship...if you're in worship, and you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, stop right there. Back up...go find that person and deal with the issue. Be reconciled. Then return to worship.

Jesus is indicating that there is a direct connection between our horizontal relationships and our vertical one. If something is out of alignment in our human relationships, it hinders our ability to worship and serve God! So Jesus gives priority to reconciling with another person, over worshipping God! That is how important and with what esteem, Jesus holds our relationships with one another!

In Matthew 18: 18, Jesus talks about “binding and loosing”. This is the language of discernment. Jewish rabbis “bound” a law when they determined that a commandment applied to a certain situation; they “loosed” a law when they determined that it did not apply under certain circumstances. What is “bound” or “loosed” is the law, not the person.

For example, Jesus “loosed” the law of the Sabbath, when he determined that it was the loving thing to heal on the Sabbath. “Binding or loosing” means interpreting the scripture as to whether or not it applies in a particular situation. Essentially, Jesus gives this authority to the gathered community, to prayerfully discern what is sin, and what is not, according to the Word of God, and to lovingly hold one another accountable.

Most important, in verse 20 of Matt. 18 Jesus makes a promise to us which makes our obedience in such matters possible. He promises: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Notice this promise is made NOT in the context of worship, but in the context of instructions on reconciliation!

Whenever we struggle together to determine how to apply God’s word to our lives, to determine how to discipline with grace, how to speak the truth in love, how to listen to one another with care and intention; when we seek God’s discernment as a community of Grace, Jesus promises to be present!

Perhaps what the world needs most is NOT a conflict free church, but a church that can model Jesus’ peacemaking principles, when applied with/engaged in with humility, can turn things around, and make a difference.

Repentance means to change one’s change of mind; to be walking in one direction, and make a 180 degree turn.

Such repentance makes reconciliation and restoration possible.

Sin and conflict can present us with a unique opportunity to BE the church, to experience the presence of Christ in our midst, and to model/demonstrate to the larger world and community, a new way forward.

May it be so!

PRAY