

Title: Get Out the China
Text: Matthew 18:15-20
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Imagine an empty chair.

Most of the time, we do not pay much attention to an empty chair. A chair is just a chair. But sometimes an empty chair can fill an entire room. You know what I mean.

Some tables have people who used to sit there. Family gatherings contain invitations where everybody knows who isn't coming. Some friendships have a phone number still in the phone, but nobody calls it anymore. Even churches have seats where two people can sit twenty feet apart every Sunday and somehow feel miles apart. Sometimes the chair is empty because someone has died. Sometimes someone moved away, and the pew is empty. And sometimes, well, someone simply is not there anymore.

An argument caused a fracture, and something was said. Maybe a confidence was broken, or someone took a side. Then someone else took the other side. Maybe we remember exactly what happened, or maybe we do not because time blurs the memory. But we still remember the hurt. And so, the chair sits there – empty.

At first, we notice. We feel the absence. But human beings are remarkably adaptable. After a while, we learn how to live with an empty chair. We rearrange the table. We change the guest list. We figure out who will come for Thanksgiving and who will come at Christmas. We learn which aisle to walk down at the grocery store. We learn where to sit in the fellowship hall. We learn how to be polite in the narthex.

“Good morning.”

“How are you?”

“Fine. How are you?”

“Fine.”

And we keep moving. After a while, the remarkable thing isn't that the chair became empty. The remarkable thing is that we hardly notice it anymore.

Just before the words we heard this morning, Jesus tells his disciples an important story about a shepherd. He tells of a shepherd out at dusk, counting sheep through the gate, boots heavy with the day's mud, and the count comes up short. One is missing.

Now, ninety-nine out of a hundred sounds pretty good to me. If I got ninety-nine percent on a test, I would be delighted.

Apparently, shepherds do not count that way. He does not lock the gate on the ninety-nine and call it good enough. Jesus says, he picks his lantern back up, snags his coat in the bramble, and goes back out into the dark for the one. And, almost before Jesus finished the story, he turns to his disciples and says, “If another member of the church sins against you, go...”

There that word is again. That pesky word, “Go.” Something has happened. Someone has hurt you. Now a distance exists where there was none before.

And Jesus says, “Go.”

Now, I am not sure I like that. If someone has sinned against me, it seems to me that they ought to do the going. They know what they did. Let them call me. Let them apologize to me. Let them cross the room and work it out with me.

Besides, by this point, I may have already told three people what happened. I was certainly not gossiping. No, I was just “processing,” or so I tell myself.

And those three people have been very helpful. They have confirmed what I suspected. I am ready with my argument, my evidence, and maybe even witnesses. And Jesus says, “Go.” He wants us alone, just the two of us, to work it out together.

We are to tell the truth about what happened. And if that person listens, well, here it comes... the tension of the moment rises, and surely this is the moment when Jesus tells us that we have won. The offender finally understands. We were right. They were wrong. Case closed.

Except Jesus does not say that, does he? Jesus says, “If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.”

“Regained.” Now, that word is curious. I thought we were trying to settle an argument. Jesus seems to be looking at a person and not the ability to win. I thought the question was, “Who is right?” Jesus seems to be asking, “Who is missing?” Good grief!

Jesus says, “You have regained that one.” Not: You won. Not: You proved your point. You have regained that one. The one whose name makes something tighten inside you. The one you know how to avoid. The one sitting twenty feet away and somehow miles away. Yes, that one is regained. They become a face again, a name again, a brother, and a sister who is now present.

Years ago, when I was a summer intern in Mishawaka, Indiana, an older woman in the congregation invited me to her home for a meal. Her husband had died only a few months before I arrived. I remember going to her house and seeing her setting the table.

There were just two places. She was setting out dishes and silverware, and being young and practical and thinking I was being helpful, I said, “You don’t need to go to all this trouble. We can eat on paper plates.”

She stopped what she was doing and turned to face me. She looked at me, straight into my face with clear eyes and level gaze, and quite clearly, rather forcefully, she said, “Eddie, my husband died a few months ago. Yesterday, there was one person around this table. Today, there are twice as many people around this table as yesterday.”

Then she said words that echo in my memory, “Today, we will use the fine china and silverware.”

So, we did. She took the china from the cabinet. She laid out the silverware. We sat down together, the two of us. Two people eating lunch together. Her husband's absence had not disappeared. His chair was still empty. Yesterday, one. Today, two. And we ate.

I have thought about that table many times through the years. Maybe that is why that word of Jesus stays with me: **regained**. Someone present who might have remained absent.

Now, that doesn't mean everything goes back to the way it was. Some things can't. Words cannot be unsaid. Trust can take a long time to rebuild. Some relationships are dangerous, and Jesus isn't asking anyone to put themselves in harm's way. Forgiveness does not erase boundaries. Love does not eliminate accountability. Matthew knows that, too. Sometimes the other person does not listen. Sometimes others have to become involved. Sometimes the distance remains.

The shepherd notices the missing sheep, and the shepherd goes to find it. And Jesus turns to the church and says, "You go too." Cross the distance. Tell the truth. Listen.

And on this Labor Day weekend, I wonder if this is not some of the hardest work Jesus gives the church. The work of crossing the distance between us and another human being. Not because the wound is not real. Wounds are still wounds. We do not go because we know how the conversation will end. We do not really know.

We go to the one who is absent, who is still a brother, still a sister, and still the one whom the Shepherd sees.

Yes, we know something about empty chairs. Some families know exactly which subjects they can't mention at Thanksgiving. Everybody knows it. Do not bring up politics. Don't get him started on Mother's will.

Let us be honest and admit it. Sometimes we decide it is easier if somebody does not come to the reunion. So, we learn how to set the table for fewer people.

Churches know this too – a pew that used to have someone in it, a name no longer said out loud on the prayer list.

And congregations know another kind of empty chair. There are seasons when someone who was here is no longer here. Someone who will be here has not yet arrived. A congregation finds itself living for a while somewhere between what has been and what will be. What comes next? Who comes next? And in a season of transition, those are real questions. But perhaps Jesus gives the church a word before we ever know the answers.

The shepherd notices. One is missing, and the Shepherd goes. We wander, and God comes looking. We hide, and God calls out our name. We put distance between ourselves and one another. God keeps crossing it.

Until in Jesus Christ, God comes all the way to where we are. The Word becomes flesh – skin and breath and hunger – and lives among us. Christ sits at tables. Christ touches those whom others keep at a distance. Christ eats with people others have decided not to eat with. Christ keeps moving toward others as he seeks to find and gather.

And then Jesus says something at the end of this passage that most of us have heard all our lives: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

We usually hear that verse when the crowd is small. "Well, there may not be many of us here tonight, but where two or three are gathered..." That's fine.

But look at where Matthew puts it. Someone has been hurt. There has been distance. Someone goes. Someone speaks. Someone listens. Someone is regained. Two or three are gathered.

And Jesus says: Not once it is settled that I am there. Not once we have made up, I am there. In going itself, before we know how the conversation ends, Christ says, “I am there.”

So, if there is a chair at our table that is empty – we know the one – the word this morning is not to wait. Remember what I said earlier: forgiveness does not erase boundaries. In practice, that means the shape of “going” will differ from person to person. For some of you, that “going” is a phone call you are putting off. For others, if the distance holds real danger, the going may need to be toward a safe person first – a friend, a counselor, or this pastor. Jesus does not ask you to walk into harm. But he does ask us not to let the ache go unspoken. Jesus’ word is clear: “go.”

Years later, I still remember that table in Mishawaka, and I think about the woman who lost her husband. I think about her husband’s empty chair. In my heart, I still hear the sound of the china as she sets it on the table. I can see the silverware beside the plates next to the folded napkins. Yesterday, there had been one. Today, there were two – two, where there might have been only the memory of one. And I remember lifting the glass and taking a sip of iced tea.

At first, it tasted mostly like water. But somewhere around the second or third sip – may I dare to say it? – It tasted a little like wine.