

All In The Family – How To Work A Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

Matthew 18:15-20

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15th Sunday After Pentecost

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Shortly after coming to South Highland 22 years ago I sensed that we really needed to become even more of a connected family, a community, a people who does, as the old hymn “Blest Be the Tie That Binds says, “We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.” So, toward that end we shared in a Wednesday night small group study using a book by Dr. John M. Buchanan, pastor for many years of the Fourth Presbyterian Church on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, also a moderator of the General Assembly.

The book is entitled Being Church – Becoming Community. In it John describes aspects of the ministry he undertook to help that big beautiful gothic architecture historic church in the heart of Chicago become a real community of love and support and outreach. Not simply a place where people came to do their hour or two of church obligation on Sunday, but a true 7 day a week community of love, support, mutuality, and outreach, an authentic community bringing together a very diverse body of folks – business executives, street people, questioning 20-somethings, apartment dwellers nearby, suburbanites who drove 45 minutes or an hour down the North Shore a long way down to the city each week to come to church..

I sensed then, and I sense now, that South Highland is similar to Fourth in much of our demographics- though on a smaller scale. We too have families who come from far across two or more counties and diverse parts of our city. Some drive 45 minutes each Sunday and sometimes through the week. We too have to work hard, and seek God’s help, in growing as a true genuine community, not settling for being a pseudo-community, who just drink coffee together and say, “nice to see you” but really share life together. We have come a long way in doing that, while we still have a way to go. And part of being family means confronting family members when they have done wrong.

Our text from 2 Corinthians reminds us of our new identity because we are people in whom the Risen Christ dwells. “If any is in Christ, there is a new creation... everything has become new!” We have a new nature, though our old nature always beckons, our all-too-human sinful crudeness can slip in. As Martin Luther describes Christians, we are “simul Justus et peccator” “simultaneously justified and sinner.”

And when the sinner side gets too strong, if it is serious enough, that is, if as Jesus says in our other text from Matthew, if behavior is serious enough to be sinful, we need to exercise tough love, and care enough to go to a person who has sinned against us and honestly confront them.

Matthew 18 offers us the Magna Carta of Confrontation in instructing the church, on how to confront a fellow Christian when there is a serious break in relationships, when there is hurt or a violation of trust or an outright sin.

Now the thing we must not do is to gossip around about such a person, or ignore such a person, or blow the situation out of proportion, or, as happens so much in our culture, blast something inflammatory out over the internet across various social media.

What Jesus tells the church to do, within this teaching sermon on humility and forgiveness, which is one of the five sermons of Jesus in this Gospel, the first being the sermon on the Mount. (These five sermons are shaped by Matthew to mirror the five books of the Torah in the Old Testament to show the fullness of Jesus' teaching now in the New Testament), as the new Moses. What Jesus tells us is to go through these three progressive steps.

First go privately to a person who has sinned against you, present your side of the story, tell them how you perceive things and see how they respond. If they hear you, and acknowledge they were in the wrong, if they turn around and repent then we have begun a process of reconciliation and restoration.

Second, if they will not listen to you, return again with one or two others as witnesses, and together confront the person, so that there is no misunderstanding of what offense has occurred, and what sort of repentance is needed. Again, if they hear the small delegation and repent the person is once again on a road to recovery and restoration.

But if they do not then **third**, bring the matter publicly before the whole church. And if they still refuse to listen even to the whole church, Jesus says - "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."ⁱ

Even then, if that has to happen, remember Gentiles and tax collectors were not objects of shunning and ostracism, but persons of mission loved by God and objects to whom you are continually to reach out. Remember every time we leave this church "You are now entering the Mission Field." As Eugene Peterson paraphrases the teaching in The Message, like this,

"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."ⁱⁱ

This is the way the Bible teaches us to engage with someone who has done wrong. Begin in the most private quiet way, and only if necessary raise the matter to a higher level.

This same sort of caring compassionate ethic is clear throughout the Bible. For example, in Leviticus 19 we read THESE INSTRUCTIONS,

“You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God; I am the Lord.

You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord.

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This process of confrontation to bring a reconciliation is not easy work. Family life is messy. Community Church Family life is messy. Think of your own family and those times you had to have a tough love confrontation with a son or daughter or parent or grandparent. We tend to want to let things slide and as Southerners just say, “well bless your sweet little heart.” I know I do that. Sometimes I wait too long to address someone where there is a problem, and then what could have been a small discussion turns into a big blow-up.

If we are family we engage with one another, we are to be open and honest and authentic with one another. It is true for us in our own families and for us in our church as a church family. Following the way of Jesus Christ, we are to practice honest confrontation, beginning on the lowest level possible, not quickly writing a person off, not confronting to seek revenge but aiming for reconciliation and restoration. All this is hard work. But this is what we followers of Jesus are called to do, and remembering we do not act alone. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Says Jesus.

As John Buchanan, the pastor at Fourth Church in Chicago said,

“God does not want revenge. God wants forgiveness, reconciliation. At the heart of the Christian tradition is the profoundly radical idea that God, the sovereign of history is in the reconciliation business; that God has, from the beginning, been redefining the right, the good, forgiveness, not retaliation.

G. K. Chesterton said, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.” So if we are going to try, if we are going to try to “speak the truth in love” and seek to bring about a reconciliation let’s look more closely at these steps?

I

First – even before we go we are to **REFLECT**. We are to take time and look within ourselves. Consider what we think is the wrong another has done to us, or to the church or to someone else. Ask yourself, is this person really in the wrong, or have I perhaps been too quick

to judge and assumed things that may not be so. Is there really sin that has been going on or am I just over- reacting.

You see, Jesus is not saying to go and make a mountain out of a molehill. Do not rush out and confront a person about every little habit or quirk or mistake which you may not like. This teaching is about what we are to do when there is real serious sin to be confronted. If a person is stealing, or lying, or continuing in an adulterous affair, or destroying their life and the lives of others with drugs or alcohol, we are not to ignore it, but in love we are to go to that person and confront them. First Reflect. Does this situation merit a confrontation?

II

The second thing, **REACH OUT**. We are to initiate, we are to go to them. Set up a time and a place you can have a private conversation. Do not begin with public shaming, go privately. But reach out, initiate, go. Engage with them. Address the situation as you see it, and if it is something you share some guilt in, acknowledge your own part in the problem and ask that person for forgiveness. Tell the person you want to be reconciled with them, and you want them to be reconciled with the community, and with God. Be willing to make the first move, even if you think they should.

III

Third **RECEIVE**. Do not dump your accusations on a person and rush out the door - stay with them and listen. Be present with them. Hear their side of the story. There may be a lot you do not know. There may be much more going on than you recognized at first. Stay there with them and give them space and support, if necessary a shoulder to cry on, a safe space to utter a private confession.

IV

Fourth, the goal is always **RECONCILIATION**. If the person hears you and acknowledges the wrong they have done, they are on the road to recovery. They are moving toward reconciliation and restoration. Reconciliation and restoration are the goal, not revenge retaliation and removal.

Do you know that fully one half of that all-time best seller The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church USA is "The Rules of Discipline?" This is the part no one wants to have to go to, but here are laid out the precise procedures the church is to follow when there is a serious violation of trust. One of my great mentors, Dr. David Stitt, who was President of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, said, "The Book of Order is an understanding between ladies and gentlemen in good times, and the law of the Medes and the Persians in bad times. "

The preamble of all these rules and procedures makes it clear that the goal is "to bring members to repentance and restoration, to restore the unity of the church by removing the causes of discord and division."

Ask yourself, in a situation when I need to confront someone privately, am I going with the loving caring attitude that this instruction gives. Listen to The Ruler of Discipline,

“The power that Jesus Christ has vested in his Church, a power manifested in the exercise of church discipline, is one for building up the body of Christ, not for destroying it, for redeeming, not for punishing. It should be exercised as a dispensation of mercy and not of wrath so that the great ends of the Church may be achieved, that all children of God may be presented faultless in the day of Christ.”^{iv}

V

Sometimes reconciliation and restoration are a slow process; it takes time. A few years ago, I was asked to participate in the 100th Anniversary service of Independent Presbyterian Church, our sister congregation down at the other end of Highland Avenue. Now today we share in much ministry together, many of us serving as STAIR tutors with tutors from IPC. I joke that most of their staff got their Christian upbringing here at South Highland! Elizabeth Goodrich, Catherine Bonner Goodreau, Susan Clayton. We share in much ministry and mission together with IPC.

But if you know your local church history you know that it was not always like that. IPC was formed in 1915 as a church split out from South Highland when the pastor here at that time Dr. Henry Edmonds, led over half of our membership out the doors and across the street to Temple Emanuel on a particular Sunday morning. Families and friendships were ripped apart.

The issue concerned some very serious theological differences. But, as our own church history describes it, much of it also concerned differences in strong personalities between the progressive more liberal pastor Dr. Henry Edmonds, and a leading elder, a conservative fundamentalist Mr. James Bowron, an ancestor of Marge Perkins and Bill French, who was accustomed, says our history, “to authority in his role As Treasurer of the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company.... He even looked the part of an Old Testament patriarch with his long, white beard.”^v He played Santa Claus at church Christmas celebrations.

I bring all this background up simply to tell you what I said in my greetings to IPC at their 100th anniversary service that was held at the Alabama Theater. I told them, that had George Washington in 1789, when he was inaugurated as our first President, invited King George III of England, from whom the American Colonies had rebelled, to come over and give greetings at his inauguration it would have been a pretty chilly event. However now the United States and Great Britain have fully reconciled. Queen Elizabeth II made many warm welcomed visits to the United States over her reign, including one where I was present in Statutory Hall of the U.S. Capitol along with President Gerald Ford as she loaned us an original copy of the Magna Carta for our U.S. 200th anniversary celebration. Now England is our closest ally. Sometimes reconciliation and restoration take time. (You know I think we need another loan of that founding Magna Carta document of democracy once again in this nation – especially in the halls of Congress!)

Oh, what a difference it makes in a church and an individual, to be reconciled. To be reunited. To be restored. “Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, ever more His Praises sing, Alleluia! Alleluia!” Praise with me the everlasting king. Becoming Church - Becoming Community. Paul writes in that 5th chapter of 2 Corinthians,

“So, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”^{vi}

Paul concludes this letter to a Church divided into factions, who had worked up hostility toward Paul and toward one another, Paul is reaching out to them, confronting them and welcoming them back, he concludes saying this,

“Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you...? Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God, and
The communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”^{vii}

Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 18:17

ⁱⁱ The Message, Eugene Peterson, p.46

ⁱⁱⁱ Leviticus 19:13-17

^{iv} Book of Order – The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. – Part 2, The Rules of Discipline, D. 1.0102

^v A Heritage of Witness - South Highland Presbyterian Church 1888-2013, p.22-23

^{vi} 2 Corinthians 5:20

^{vii} 2 Corinthians 13:5, 11-13