

Family Fights  
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson  
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church  
September 04, 2011

Text: Matthew 18:15-20

NRSV

Reproving Another Who Sins

<sup>15</sup> “If another member of the church sins **against you**<sup>1</sup>, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. <sup>16</sup> But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup> If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them.

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The Sermon

If this text from Matthew’s Gospel doesn’t make you squirm, you either weren’t paying attention as it was read, or you have learned how to confront in this biblically prescribed manner, and we could all benefit learning from and with you.

I say this because it seems that the Christian church in this day and age is bipolar. On the one hand here are some groups of the faithful who are so willing to judge others in their midst and exclude them from their fellowship if they fail to follow the party line, that we probably all know some of the “walking wounded” who have experienced such rejection and have never again felt completely safe in a church – any church. Or maybe we are one of those with wounds still fresh in mind.

Meanwhile there are congregations – often but not always mainline – that have forsaken any attempt to hold members accountable for much of anything.

I learned this early on in ordained ministry when, in a Session meeting at the church I was serving in Southern Indiana, I asked why a certain elder had not attended any of the Session meetings I’d moderated to that point.

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<sup>1</sup> *The words “against you (singular) are not in some ancient and well-respected manuscripts. This is significant, as it relates to whether we are being challenged to go and point out the fault of a fellow believer only when you believe he or she has wronged you, or whenever I think he or she has committed what the Scripture labels “a sin,” whether or not it affects me.*

The response was that this elder never or only rarely attended Session meetings.

So I asked what I thought was a reasonable question: “And why then is he still an Elder on Session?”

I was then told that it was because this fellow’s Uncle Henry would be so hurt if his nephew was dismissed from Session.” And I subsequently learned how proud Uncle Henry had been when his nephew had been nominated and elected to serve in this role.

So I asked what I also thought was a reasonable question, namely, “And just who is this Uncle Henry.”

The answer left me almost speechless. I was told “Oh, Henry doesn’t worship here any more, because he got upset by something the previous pastor did or said.”

And I said to myself, “Welcome to the ministry in the real world.”

I wish I could say this was the only time I’ve encountered resistance to appropriate discipline or simply following the Book of Order, but I’ve heard variations on this theme in each church I’ve served.

I’ve since learned the expression, “Misery doesn’t just enjoy company, it enjoys miserable company,” so I take some comfort in sharing these words from a Lutheran colleague in ministry – related to the contemporary church’s seeming unwillingness to confront anyone about anything.

The Rev. Brian Stoffregen writes:

*In every church I've served, dealing inactive members has always been a dreaded chore. Why are we reluctant to be honest with people and tell them, "You are inactive," when they have absented themselves from worship for two or more years? Why do some want to keep their names on a membership roll when they are not willing to participate as a member in the organization?*

Sound familiar to those of you on the Membership Ministry Team charged with tending to the rolls?

So dear sisters and brothers in Christ, I stand before you today as an Interim Minister who feels no need to serve a congregation whose motto is “kick the sinners out!” – but who also believes we are called to exercise appropriate discipline, and take appropriate membership action – if our body of faith is to model a community of faith worthy of serving “in Christ’s name.”

So let me share some additional reflections on what we can learn from this passage.

First, although many say to me that they believe they can worship better in private, all alone under a tree, that such a setting is not where Jesus says in this passage that he will meet us.

Rather, Jesus says that we are to conduct his business in community, and that he will be present in our midst when two or three of us are gathered together in his name. That is when he promises to be in our midst, not when we are off by ourselves feeling holy.

Lord knows it is tempting to isolate.

Lord knows we each probably hate to feel as vulnerable as we sometimes do in a faith community in which we have invested ourselves.

But the reality is that we need each other, and Jesus knows this. That's the way we were created to live, in community. We need each other for practical reasons as well as for spiritual ones.

- ▶ We need each other because two heads are better than one;
- ▶ We need each other because we can accomplish more together than we can apart;
- ▶ We need each other like brothers and sisters need each other, to remind themselves that they belong to one family.

When families work right – and Lord knows they don't always work right – they are God's way of teaching us important things:

- like how to share
- like how to work together
- like how to look out for each other and to take care of one another.

I like how Barbara Brown Taylor expresses this. She says:

A healthy family has a way of smoothing our rough edges by making us rub up against each other, like tumbling pebbles in a jar.

Living with others we learn that we cannot have everything our own way.

Like it or not, we need families, we need spouses, we need roommates, and sometimes we need church-mates, to learn how to fight. Having brothers or sisters with whom to practice "healthy fighting" can be an enormous benefit.

I learned this reality once our daughter was old enough to play with others in the neighborhood. As an only child, she'd come crying home to Mommy or Daddy, because she was getting chewed up in the typical neighborhood childrens' squabbles.

Of course she was getting chewed up. She was especially being dominated in time spent with a family next door who had five kids.

By necessity they'd learned to stand up for themselves, something our daughter still needed to learn. Indeed, the longer she spent time with them the more she learned some of the ways that even the youngest of the five held her own.

Sadly, not all families, not all neighborhoods, not all congregations are places that provide wonderful laboratories in human relations. They are not schools to learn tolerance and respect for differences, instead they are more like reformatories where rules are more important than people, and where the first rule is silence – silence about anything unpleasant or that could be considered “dirty laundry.”

In such families and emotional networks the mantra is that harmony – even the illusion of harmony – is the most important thing, more important than telling the truth, more important than your feelings, and more important, finally, than you.

And so it can be in many congregations. They'll get rid of a pastor, or pastor after pastor, before they'll address their own internal dynamics. They'll drive out new families that dare to say, “The Emperor has no clothes,” before they'll acknowledge the truth of that. Not here at Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church, of course, but in some congregations <g>.

Fortunately, the Bible, from its earliest pages on through its latest, is fairly open-eyed about life in communities of faith. Matthew, certainly, has no illusions about the church. As Tom Long puts it in his commentary on Matthew:<sup>2</sup>

In Matthew's church people – no matter how committed – are still people, and stormy weather is always a possible forecast. “Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love”; even so, painful breaks can occur in once tender and loving relationships. “We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord”; nevertheless, sharp and cruel words can split a congregation into angry factions. “The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord”; but greed, lust, and envy can threaten to shake even a strong church off its footing. What happens when the menu at the church potluck includes such unwelcome entries as rage, hatred, and betrayal?

So, Matthew's Jesus gives some advice, and there are two curious things about it.

1. First, he puts the burden on the victim, on the person who has been sinned against. Doesn't that seem strange to you? It sure does to me.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas C. Long. Matthew. Westminster Bible Companion. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.

2. Second, he seems much less interested in who is right and who is wrong than he is in getting the family back together again. The important thing is that we listen to each other, he says. And if we don't want to, we are to keep trying.

Even when there is a complete impasse, and when Jesus permits what sounds like excommunication, the words he uses – “treat them like a Gentile or a tax collector” – may mean treat those groups like he does; invite them to be your disciples; have dinner with them; tell them they are taking you to dinner; and so on.

In other words, keep trying to get them back in the group, but don't let them stay in the group while they are a festering wound.

As someone has said, “Becoming a Christian is easy. It is following Jesus that's the difficult part.” And so it is when it comes to learning how to enact “carefrontation” with the goal of reconciliation, rather than simply “confrontation” with the goal of getting your point across in no uncertain terms.

May God grant us continuing wisdom as we learn how to be human beings in Christian community.