

September 7, 2014 - Matthew 18:15-20
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Honesty & Tenacity

“If another member of the church sins against you...”so begins today’s gospel passage from the middle of the eighteenth chapter of Matthew. “If another member sins against you.” That’s a rather optimistic *if*, isn’t it? That’s like saying, *If* your sister has way of getting on your nerves... *If* your spouse forgets an important date... *If* your colleague at work makes a mess that you have to clean up. *If* you are part of a family, a relationship, an organization, a community, you will have the experience of another member aggravating you, letting you down, making your life more difficult—or to use the theological term, sinning against you.

In all honesty, I think we can all agree that the “if” of Mathew 18 is really a “when.” “When another sins against you...” And then? Then follows what you do, when you are a part of a particular community that is a community of believers. There are particular steps you take, when that’s the case. Those steps are: first you go to them directly and try to be reconciled. If that doesn’t work bring a witness with you and talk to them. If that doesn’t work, bring it to the church. If that doesn’t work, treat them like a Gentile or a tax collector.

Those are the steps of Matthew 18, this chapter which is another one of the five great discourses that form a structure for this gospel, the discourse today having a focus on church community. In fact, the chapter as a whole is sometimes described as a church handbook, and these steps are sometimes even included in actual church handbooks. I’ve even seen them laid out into a flow chart: if this, then this, then this, then this.

There’s sense to that. It can be helpful to see things laid out with accompanying graphics. I have to confess, though, I have mixed feelings about flowcharts, and I don’t think I’m alone in this. I think culturally we’ve acquired a certain wariness about pictorial representations of organizational behaviors and plans. I think there’s something of a subgenre of comedy that is dedicated to making fun of charts and graphs and the way they can be manipulative or confusing. Think of the cartoon *Dilbert*, or the TV show *The Office*, or any number of spoofs of org-chart-speak and visually aided presentations. Perhaps you yourself have sat through a Power Point presentation that was so convoluted it made you laugh, or perhaps cry, as you watched slide after slide, endless boxes linked together by arrows.

Inured by such experiences, I tend to think making Matthew 18 into a flowchart makes it both confusing and boring. But what Jesus says here about what to do when someone sins against you is both more interesting, and more simple. It’s more simple, in that for all that there are multiple steps, they all boil down to two characteristics. It’s more interesting, in that this series of steps has a surprise at the end—there’s a last step that isn’t.

But first those two characteristics: honesty, and tenacity.

We’ve already acknowledged that, honestly, every one of us will have the experience of another person sinning against us. Not if, but when. Although, sometimes it takes some time for us to actually, specifically acknowledge this. It can take some time before we are able to say, “You know, that’s just not sitting right with me. What this person is doing is wrong.” I think sometimes it takes time for us to get to that point because we don’t want to be mean, or judgmental, or accusatory. We fear it would be unchristian to say someone has sinned against us. Actually, it’s much more theologically accurate to acknowledge the existence of human fault. Honesty about the human condition is very much a part of the Christian tradition.

Christians believe that humans beings, while wonderfully made, are also prone to messing up in any number of ways. You might say that Christians are in agreement with a certain famous bumper sticker, a memorable and pithy bumper sticker about what happens. To express that truth, using churchier terms, we say, sin happens.

This understanding of humanity is ritualized in our worship services, right at the very beginning, with the rite known as Confession and Forgiveness. It's a sacred space of time, set aside to reflect on sin, on the pervasiveness of sin—a pervasiveness that includes us. For of course, if everyone has had the experience of other people sinning against them, well who do you think is doing all that sinning? We're included in the pervasiveness of sin, what we have done, what we have left undone. Confession and Forgiveness is a way of being honest about who we are individually, and collectively. We confess that, we are convicted of that, here in the presence of God and one another. We are honest about sin.

Matthew 18 says, be honest about it with that other person. Go directly to them, when the two of you are alone, and talk about it. Isn't it a wonder how often we mess this up? Isn't it much more often our tendency to talk to someone else, rather than the person with whom we have a grievance? At least, that's my experience, that's my inclination and urge. I'm upset, I complain to a third party. Matthew 18 convicts me on this, shows me how very often I trip on this very first step! Matthew 18 says, first go directly to them. Be honest with them—and so also give them the chance to be honest. Give them the chance to be honest with you, and to be honest with themselves. Maybe then you can be reconciled.

If you can't, then bring in another person—still including the person who has done you wrong. If that doesn't work, then make the discussion yet wider. You try this, and then this, and then this. See the second characteristic, tenacity? Tenacity ties the steps together, connects them all toward a single goal, a single end: reconciliation. We are honest about sharing grievances because our goal is right relationship with one another. A tenacity for reconciliation runs through the steps, to the very last step, and beyond—for here's the surprise, it's a last step that isn't... last. If you have exhausted all the steps, if you have tried talking honestly, just the two of you; and then with another few people; and then with a larger group; if you've tried all that and you still are not reconciled, then let that person be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

At first that sounds harsh. Consider them an outsider, a Gentile? See them as someone who does the despised job of collecting taxes? But upon further reflection, how was it that Jesus treated outsiders? And didn't the early church take the surprising step to include Gentiles? And isn't Matthew, the writer of this gospel with this discourse with these steps, isn't Matthew the disciple who was a tax collector?

The last step sends us back to the beginning, back to seeing people who have sinned against us as people we must work to welcome in to the community of believers. That's how we see people who sin against us, we see them as people in need of God's love and forgiveness. Like us. That's who we are: people in need of reconciliation with God. There was no *if* about it. When we were sinners, Christ died for us.

Today the gospel tells us, be honest, and tenacious, and when you reach that last step, go back to the beginning, because the end, God's end, is reconciliation. Go back to the beginning, remembering how God welcomed you. Today, Rally Day, go back to the beginning of Matthew 18. The chapter that is a Christian handbook begins with a child, chapter 18 begins with Jesus placing a child in the midst of the community of believers. "Welcome this child," Jesus says, "and you welcome me."