

“A Community of Reconciliation: Part I”
a 2-part series
Mt. 18:15-20
Sunday, September 10, 2017
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Reconciliation is hard! We don't like to forgive others, do we? We prefer to hold grudges and nurse resentments and remember forever the wrongs done to us.

Today's message is the first of two sermons on reconciliation in the church. (If you want to hear the second half of the message, you'll have to come back in two weeks; Elbert's preaching next week... You should come next week, too, and hear Elbert! ... You should be here every week!)

The intent of today's teaching from Jesus is to love the offender, and to try to find a way to “regain” (v. 15) the offender for the church. At the same time, the offended party must be cared for. The church, flawed as we are, has as its purpose the care of hurting people – both the sinner and the one sinned against. There are no easy answers. Much prayer is required, and much humility. Jesus does not leave us alone with these challenges. He gives us his teaching, his example, and his Holy Spirit to show us the way.

I. Reconciliation: the process.

Chapter 18 in Matthew is filled with teachings about the discipleship of humility. We need to learn humility in order to live as reconciled brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus teaches about the power of humility (vv.1-5), and warns against tempting a child of God to sin (vv. 6-9). In the verses just before today's teaching Jesus tells the story of the Lost Sheep. And in part two of this sermon series we will reflect on Jesus' subsequent teaching about forgiveness. We can

gather from the context of chapter 18 that Jesus is teaching us how to care for the offender. Jesus is teaching us how to forgive the sinner and reconcile the sinner with the church. Lost Sheep – Reconciliation – Forgiveness. This is not a set of teachings on how to reprimand a wrong-doer. These are teachings for the church on how to show love to that same wrong-doer -- because tomorrow someone else will be the wrong-doer. For the good of the church, we seek reconciliation with one another.

The process Jesus teaches is often called The Rule of Christ. The Rule of Christ involves naming the sin, the repentance of the sinner and, when needed, the community's support of the victim. Of course, one of the challenges in church conflict is that it is often difficult to sort out who is the sinner and who is the victim. Everyone thinks they are the victim; rarely does someone repent or seek forgiveness. Something for us all to ponder.

I like Leonard Sweet's 5-step summary of Jesus' reconciliation process. Here it is:

1. Put Your Complaint into Words.
2. Tell the Person about It in Person.
3. Counsel with Other Wise Christians.
4. Make Use of the Christian Fellowship.
5. Never Give up Trying.

Item 1 – “put your complaint into words.” How often do we silently stew in our own heads, never putting into words what we're angry about? Jesus says, in v. 15, that if we put our complaint into words, we have a chance to “win over” or “regain” our brother or sister for the church. That's worth the effort, don't you think?

Item 2 – “tell the person about it in person.” How often do we complain about what so-and-so did, whispering in corners in the sanctuary or the social hall, never speaking directly to

the person who hurt us? This is what psychologists call passive-aggressive behavior. We all do it! Jesus says, cut it out! Speak to your brother or your sister who has hurt you, “when you are alone together.” I’m not saying it’s easy. I’m just saying it’s what Jesus is teaching.

Item 3 – “counsel with other wise Christians.” We know reconciliation is hard. We know working through church conflict is difficult and painful. It takes time and prayer. It also require community, supporting each other in the goal of reconciliation. When we take a conflict to “two or three witnesses,” as Jesus instructs in v. 16, it’s not like a court. It’s not about punishing the person we’re angry with. It’s not about shaming anyone. It’s about getting help and advice, love and support from the wise Christians among us. We have such folks in our church; let’s use them as needed.

Item 4 – “make use of the Christian fellowship.” v. 17. Jesus instructs us to report the conflict to the church, if needed. In our United Methodist Church, this might mean bringing the conflict to the Pastor, or to the Staff Parish Relations Committee; maybe the Administrative Council. It could mean, in some situations, bringing the conflict to the whole church on a Sunday morning. Always, it means praying for everyone involved. Conflict affects the whole body of the church. It affects our whole church family. In San Gabriel, it affects the whole valley. You know what I mean; everywhere you go in the San Gabriel Valley, you run into someone you know. And often folks start talking about what’s going on at each other’s churches. Resolving conflict is important for the whole church, universal.

Item 5 – “never give up trying.” This actually appears in verse 22. Jesus tells Peter he is to forgive another church member who sins against him seventy-seven times. Not the seven times Peter suggests, but seventy-seven times! -- this is how often we are to forgive a fellow Christian who sins against us. We will delve into that idea more fully in two weeks when we

address the topic of “forgiveness.”

What sets us apart as Christians is our sincere attempt to follow the Rule of Christ. What sets us apart is our humble, prayerful efforts at reconciliation. Forget about reconciliation between North Korea and the United States, Islamic terrorists and Jews and Christians and Americans. As we remember the anniversary of 9-11 and honor the fallen... as we continue to pray in the aftermath of Charlottesville and other expressions of racial hatred... Christians start with reconciliation at home, in our own church families.

II. Reconciliation: a disciple’s responsibility.

Reconciliation is a process that takes time. Part of our responsibility as members of a church family is to agree to stick it out together -- to worship together on Sundays even when we’re mad at each other; to do the work of boards and councils and committees even when we don’t feel like talking to each other; to pray together and study the Bible together and fellowship together and do mission work together and visit the sick together – even when we can’t see our way through to full reconciliation and forgiveness. Remember item 5: “Never Give up Trying.” If we leave the church, or avoid certain church gatherings, or refuse to shake hands with certain folks – then we’ve given up trying.

Folks, reconciliation is more important than mission work. Our mission work ought to grow out of our love for one another. If we can’t reconcile with each other; if we can’t forgive each other, then we have nothing to share with the world.

I’m not talking about warm, fuzzy feelings. We get along with some members of our church family better than others. Maybe a person we’re mad at today will be our best friend and defender tomorrow. These rifts and disagreements work themselves out over time. God works them out, through the mysteries and the power of his Holy Spirit.

But we have to show up. We have to hang in there with our church family. We have to suffer through the hard times if we are to enjoy the fruits of God's Spirit that are released when we do so.

Reconciliation is hard!

We are called to endure. We are called to be faithful. We are called to remember that we have a purpose, a mission, a calling in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. "We are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world" -- this is the mission statement of the United Methodist Church.

Making disciples begins with being disciples. As disciples of Jesus Christ we practice reconciliation.

Closing.

Helen? Is Helen here today? Helen loves stories. Don't we all? I have one story for you today before we go to the Table.

"Once upon a time, two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in their 40 years of working together. It began with a small misunderstanding, and grew into a major difference, and finally exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence. One morning, there was a knock on John's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. 'I'm looking for a few days' work,' he said. 'Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there that I could help with?'

" 'Yes,' said the older brother. 'I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my younger brother! Last week, there was a meadow between us, but he took his bulldozer and dug a small river between us. Well I'm going to do him one better. See that pile of old lumber? I want you to build an 8 foot high fence between us. Then I won't need to see his

place or his face anymore.’ The carpenter said, ‘Show me the nails and the tools, and I’ll do a good job for you.’

“The older brother had to go to town, so he left for the day. At sunset, when he returned, his eyes opened wide, and his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. The carpenter had built a bridge that stretched from one side of the river to the other, with handrails and all! And his younger brother was coming toward them, his hand outstretched. ‘You’re quite the guy,’ he said, ‘after all I’ve said and done.’ The two brothers met in the middle, and shook each other’s hand. They turned to see the carpenter leaving. ‘No, wait! Stay a few days. I’ve a lot of other projects for you,’ said the older brother. ‘I’d love to,’ the carpenter said, ‘but I have many more bridges to build.’” (source: Bob Tasler)

Jesus has built many bridges for us. Come to the Table this morning, as a sign of reconciliation, as a beloved child of God, as one redeemed and forgiven through the saving acts of Jesus Christ.

Amen.