

In Front of Everyone?

Matthew 18:15-20

September 7, 2008

It was a new appointment. The young pastor's first. One of the older couples in the church invited him to dinner. While the wife was preparing the food, the pastor sat down in the living room with the husband, a deacon in the church.

It didn't take long for the conversation to involve things related to the church. The young pastor had heard about there being some big fight several years before that had split the church. He thought it would help him be more effective as a pastor if he knew more about this tragic event. So, he asked the deacon about it.

The deacon began: "Well, as I remember it the fuss was over the location of the piano. Some wanted it on the right of the pulpit and others on the left."

The pastor asked the obvious question: "Which side did you and your wife favor?"

The old deacon paused, scratched his head a bit, and then finally called out to the kitchen, "Ma, which side of the pulpit did we want the piano on in the big church fight?"¹

There was obviously an issue causing problems in the early church that the leaders felt needed to be addressed. We're not told what it is but the situation was serious enough that the leaders felt the need to put the guidelines for how to deal with in the mouth of Jesus.

The early church leaders knew their response had to be different than what it might have been before God had become one of us. The old system was based on the idea that God blesses the righteous and curses those who do wrong. If they still lived by that system, it would have been simple to resolve. "Someone did something wrong. Well, here's the punishment we've determined is appropriate for that sin." The distance between good and bad would have been maintained.

But, the early church knew they were now dealing with a God who was more interested in healing and bridging the distance between us – a God who wanted to be brought closer to those who did wrong rather than a God who wanted to be further distanced from wrongdoers.²

And so was created this four-step approach to handling conflict. The purpose of the approach they developed was to create reconciliation rather than allowing ill feelings to fester and possibly worsen. The purpose of making persons aware of how they might have hurt you – might have wronged you – is not so you can get back at them, make them see things the way you see them – correct them – but to heal your relationship. We are called to be healers in the world and in order to do that we need to learn to be healers in our own body – in our own community of faith.

The first thing we are to do when someone has wronged us is to put into words what we believe the situation to be. There's nothing any worse than brooding about our being wronged. We need to avoid it simmering too long in our heads and hearts because we risk blowing it out of proportion. We are to nip brooding about the situation too long because the longer we do the more we are likely to make more out of it than it has to be. Sometimes this alone will take care of the conflict because we will be able to see that the sleight was really unintentional or trivial.

But, if after examining the situation – bringing it into clearer focus – the situation still seems to be something that is hurtful between the two of you, well, then go to the person personally to the person. Don't send a letter or email. Don't send someone else. Go yourself.

How many times have we had the experience of trying to convey something in a letter or an email only to have the impersonal word convey a mood or tone we didn't intend for it to convey? How many times have situations been worsened instead of made better because we didn't honor the relationship between us enough to go in person?

Gary Parker was a new pastor and was serving his first fulltime position in Warrenton, North Carolina. A few of the men of the church invited him to an evening of basketball. It was to be a friendly pickup game. Gary reflected: "I don't know if the guys were trying to show the new pastor a thing or two or not, but the friendly game quickly developed into an every man for himself survival zone."

One player's overzealous attitude particularly irked Gary. After they had been playing awhile the two of them went up for a rebound. Gary was bumped by the other guy and the bump was accompanied by an elbow square to the mouth. Gary noted: "The warmth of blood seeping through my gums convinced me to stop playing for the evening. It also convinced me that Brit and I would never become friends."

Well, a few days later Gary decided that he had to go see Brit and talk over the incident. Brit and his brother ran a trucking company. Gary shared with Brit his concern about his competitive style of play. Gary admitted: "As we talked, I saw much in him I liked."

Brit indeed remembered the play but didn't think it was a big deal since his attitude on a basketball court was players ran that risk when they decided to play the game. "As I listened to him," Gary remembers, "I realized that I had been overly sensitive because of my status as being the new kid on the block. When I walked out of Brit's office that day," Gary says, "I walked out with a new friend."³

Most of you are probably familiar with the Andy Capp comic strip. Capp is this chronically unemployed cockney ne'er-do-well who spends most of his time either playing soccer or at the corner pub. Neither one of these activities particularly pleases his long-suffering wife, Flo.

In one of the daily strips there is a scene of Andy pacing back and forth and Flo standing with her arms crossed. She finally breaks the silence several captions into it with: "Three whole days without speaking. This is ridiculous."

Then in the next frame she says: "Andy, I'm sorry I acted the way I did ... you were right. Friends?"

Andy is noticeably a bit taken back and stumbingly says, "OK, friends."

Flo then hugs and kisses him on the cheek. When Andy leaves the house to meet one of his buddies, the buddy says, "I 'eard that, Andy. It takes a good woman to apologize when she is wrong."

Andy obviously is deep in thought at what his friend, Chalkie, has said. He finally says, "It takes a better one to apologize when she's not."⁴

If we want to clear the air between us, we need to take the initiative – take the first step. Sometimes the result is we develop a new and deeper friendship.

Well, then the early church leaders offer two more directives if the first two don't resolve the conflict. They say that we should then take a couple of the leaders in the congregation with us.

Now, the purpose for taking others with us is not to gang up on the person we believe to have done wrong. It's not to lend more evidence to our case. There's the possibility that we might be perceiving the thing wrong and a few unbiased heads might cause some new insight to be gained.

Then follows that directive we find a little uncomfortable: Get the whole church together and share in their presence what you believe the person has done to you. Can you imagine? Can you imagine standing up in front of the whole church and having someone share with everyone what they perceive you have done wrong to them?

Our reaction is to think it would never happen in this day and age. Well, my friends, I have news for you: it does still happen in some denominations. I know of a situation in a former community where a former minister went back to such a called church meeting because there were several women in the church who claimed he had been inappropriate with them. As I remember the situation he had ended up marrying one of them and that opened the flood gate of those who apparently thought it was going to be them. In other words, it was true. The amazing thing to me was he went back and listened to the charges and apparently admitted what he had done. The purpose of his attending was basically for him to hear the charges and be properly publicly condemned.

We need to understand that what the early church leaders were really suggesting here through the voice of Jesus was an alternative to taking a fellow Christian to court. They were concerned that the courtroom would set up even more of an adversarial situation and solving differences in the church could be better accomplished if Christian prayer, love and fellowship provided the backdrop.

Years ago Bruce Larson told a story about a conversation a missionary by the name of Ruth Seabury had with a Hindu social worker. At one point the social worker asked the missionary, "Do you think that most Christians know what they've got?" Ruth was puzzled by his comment and asked him to explain what he meant by it.

He offered: "Every religion has a God. Every religion has an altar. Every religion has worshipers. Every religion believes in sacrifice. But only Christians have a savior and a congregation."⁵

We are not a solitary religion. Christianity is not just about God and me. We are known as the Body of Christ and that takes all of us working together. That's, oh, so essential to the mission to which God has called us.

One of the most powerful things we have to offer this world we live in is this concept that we are in it together. I don't fully understand how it works, but I know it to be true, there is much more power when we Christian people work together, pray together, laugh together, shed tears together. That has always been and always will be the strength of the Christian movement.

If none of the aforementioned steps work, says the voice of Jesus through the early church leaders, "Well, then treat the person like a Gentile and a tax collector." Hardly seems like something Jesus would say now does it?

The words seem a bit cruel, a bit unlike Jesus. They seem to condone the practice of shunning, excommunication. “Someone doesn’t listen even when brought before the whole community of faith, well, then show them the door – be done with them.”

We’re right to sense that it seems a bit out of character for Jesus to have said such a thing, at least with our initial perception of what the words suggest. Bible commentators agree that this probably isn’t Jesus talking but the leaders of the early church, still working out of the old rabbinical saying that we should “love our neighbors and hate our enemies.”

The commentators suggest that we recall the way Jesus spoke of and dealt with tax collectors, sinners, the social outcasts, and racially different. Remember how he talked of the importance of loving the unlovable and welcoming the stranger? What the bible scholars suggest to be the more likely meaning behind the words attributed to Jesus in this text is that we should never give up on those with whom we differ – those we believe to have wronged us. Jesus is not telling us to abandon those who wrong us. Rather, he is challenging us to win them over with the love that goes beyond that which the law deems necessary. This is not a statement of condemnation – a license for shunning. It is a statement that reaffirms that Jesus Christ finds no one without hope – and we dare not either.

Remember how Jesus transformed that old rabbinical saying as: “Love your neighbor as yourself and even love your enemy.” So, first speak the truth in love - in person. Then, involve others in the church - the whole church if necessary. But in the end, don’t take the old advice. Remember that grace is the bottom line when it comes to dealing with conflict.⁶

This portion of scripture ends with words that mark who we are and provide us some real comfort: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” The Body of Christ is much more than the sum of its individual parts. Whenever we are together Christ is with us.

The Good News is that because of Jesus Christ the distance between us and God is not too great – the distance between you and me is not too great – the distance between us and those beyond our walls is not too great. We exist to be in relationship with one another and with God and Jesus showed us we could do it.

The world is in desperate need of the good news we have been given. We need to do all we can to keep our relationships with one another in good shape. We need to keep before us the importance of healing the conflicts in our midst.

I invite us into a time of reflection during the coming choir anthem and Holy Communion. I invite us to use this time as a time to formulate what we need to confess or what we need to share with one another.

Let us pray.

Closing Prayer: O God, hear the prayers in our hearts in these moments this morning. Strengthen our resolves to bridge the distance between us and you, between us and those around us. Open our minds that we might understand the torture we are putting ourselves through by holding grudges, by firing our anger, our prejudices, our hatreds, rather than seeking peace for our souls. Heal us, Lord, that we might bring your healing to others. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

1. Melvin E. Schroer and Angelo J. Mongiore, A Funny Thing Happened (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1991), p. 81 as quoted by King Duncan in sermon “Yes, But He Started It!” from Collected Sermons, Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-0000-20.
2. Mark Trotter, “Imagine a World,” Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2007), 0-000-0444.
3. Donald F. Ackland and Robert Dean, 52-Ready-To-Teach Bible Study Lessons (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1994) as quoted in King Duncan’s sermon “Yes, But He Started It!” Collected Sermons (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.
4. As stated in Stan Mooneyham, Dancing On the Strait and Narrow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), and quoted in King Duncan’s “On Picking Your Battles,” Collected Sermons (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.
5. Bruce Larson,
6. William J. Carl, III, “Straight Talk, Due Process and Grace,” Church People Beware (Lima: CSS Publishing Company, 1992), 1-55673-426-3.