

## “Building Community”

Matthew 18:15-20

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If another member of the church sins against you . . . just talk about them behind their back.

If another member of the church sins against you . . . call up some church members and complain about them.

If another member of the church sins against you . . . send them a nasty email, better yet, blind copy the pastors.

If another member of the church sins against you . . . don't say anything. Try to avoid them. Move to a different WOF Circle, resign from your post of Session—Deacons—Ushering--whatever it takes to avoid them. If all else fails, leave and join another church.

NO, no, no and No.

In this passage from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus paints the picture for his disciples of what fellowship is to look like within His church. If a brother or sister in the faith has wronged you in any way, do something about it—*constructively* --by talking directly to the person rather than behind his/her back. What a face-saving, grace-giving way to handle things! If things get reconciled between you, no one else needs to know.

If that doesn't work, take another member or two along with you—not to gang up on the person but as “witnesses” that you both met trying to resolve your differences. Taking other members with you raises the stakes a little bit but grace may still happen in the midst of discretion.

If the matter is unable to be resolved, then you bring it to the whole church since the entire church is already at risk. One such conflict, left untreated, becomes cancerous to the entire church. People begin choosing sides as talk of “he said, she said, they said” spreads poison throughout the system. It affects attendance and stewardship as well as devastates the church's Christian witness. When that happens, the church ceases to be a place of forgiveness, grace and mercy. One could say it ceases to be “the” church. When the conflict cannot be resolved, “Let the offender be to you as a Gentile and tax collector,” Jesus says. Does this mean three strikes and you're out? Remember Jesus' treatment of Gentiles and tax collectors? He ate meals with them and drank with them even though

the religious leaders became outraged at his actions. Jesus never shunned tax collectors or Gentiles, he never stopped reaching out in love to them. Matthew, author of this gospel, used to be a tax collector!

What makes us distinctly Christian—as individuals and as the Church—is not whether or not we fight, disagree or wound one another but how we go about handling and resolving these issues. Forgiveness is meant to be at the core of who we are as Christians. If we cannot be reconciled with one another within the church how will we ever be agents of reconciliation in the world? Where better to practice forgiveness than within the Church with other believers?

Matthew's deep concern in this passage is community—authentic Christian community. Matthew is working with the early Christian church in Jerusalem, a church made up of devout Jews steeped in tradition and Gentiles, those newer converts to faith, who do not know what is appropriate behavior or appropriate dress for worship. Gentiles who think eating Kosher means an all-beef hotdog! Matthew is trying to get them to work together, play together, pray together. He is aware it is work. He realizes authentic Christian community—like forgiveness—doesn't just happen. It takes work. We have to work at it and we have to allow the Holy Spirit to work within us. How do you and I build authentic, Christian community? How do we get to where we can offer authentic forgiveness to someone who has wronged us?

Perhaps we start by realizing God modeled this same practice for us.

We sinned against God. God worked miracles to bring us back.

We sinned against God. God sent prophets to call us back.

We sinned against God. God sent Christ to reconcile us.

We are not to turn our backs on those who have sinned against us just as God did not turn God's back on us. We are to approach those who have offended us just as God approached us. We are to remain in community with the offenders just as God reconciled us in the unbreakable bond of salvation through Christ.

So how do we build authentic, Christian community? How do we get to where we can offer authentic forgiveness?

As trivial as it may sound, I think we begin by changing the question. Instead of asking "How do we build authentic, Christian community?" ask a question that engenders ownership. "What am I willing to sacrifice to make authentic, Christian community happen?"

If I have been wronged, what am I willing to sacrifice to make authentic, Christian community happen? Am I willing to sacrifice my anger, my being hurt, my fill in the blank ?

If I wronged another, what am I willing to sacrifice to make authentic, Christian community happen? My pride, my being vulnerable, fill in the blank.

What am I willing to sacrifice to be reconciled to my brother or sister in faith so they may be restored to fellowship with me and to the larger church?

Jesus' words, along with being a challenge, are a calling. A calling to treat others as Jesus treats others, to treat others as Jesus treats us. A calling to reach out with love and forgiveness rather than shun, turn one's back or write someone off. Very, very demanding and difficult, isn't it? We need help from above to act as Jesus acts. We need help to do what Jesus instructs us to do. And so Jesus reminds us, "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Jesus promises to be with us, right there in our midst as we deal with uncomfortable emotions and difficult circumstances. Thanks be to God.

In just a few moments we will celebrate the Lord's Supper. We will partake of bread and juice symbols of Jesus' body and blood freely sacrificed so we may have abundant, eternal life. At the table Christ nourishes us for the tasks ahead. At the table Christ makes us new as he continues transforming you and me into the Body of Christ. Come, be fed. Amen.