

*Jesus said: "If your brother or sister offends you, go to that person and tell them the fault while you are alone. If they hear you, you have regained your relationship. But if they do not listen to you, take one or two others with you, so that there is a witness to what is said. If they still do not listen, take it to the whole community. If they cannot listen to the community, let such a person be to you as a Gentile or tax collect. 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. 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*

When I first became a pastor in the Lutheran church I was a bit idealistic, actually kind of naïve, can you imagine? I thought that I would have this wonderful time preaching and teaching and working with folks who deeply loved one another and got along really well and only said nice things about each other. Are you beginning to feel my pain? It was not far into my first call that my innocence was stripped away. People came to me to complain about each other and about the senior pastor and I had no skills – I mean like zero skills – about what do when folks weren't getting along in a church. I knew Greek and a smattering of Hebrew, lots of theology and Bible history and trivia – but nothing in Seminary had prepared me for coming face to face with conflict among the members of a church family! And it wasn't pretty.

That first call experience and the frustration of being ill-equipped to pastor in a conflict setting did have a positive outcome. It propelled me into a desperate search for tools and skills to help me and those I was called to serve become more faithful in living in community where Jesus calls us to love God and each other. Over the course of several years I learned how to build hopeful and healthy community instead of caustic and diminished expressions of dysfunctional church families. And my entire ministry has been spent teaching and living into this way of being church together, both in my own congregation and in the congregations I have worked with in our Synod.

Imagine my surprise, and delight, when I learned that the foundation for having a healthy church community – or a healthy relationship one on one with anyone, is described by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. It is, in fact, our scripture today. Precise instructions by the Master in a process that seeks to build and maintain loving relationships that support and uplift individuals and community. If you are part of Trinity, you are already familiar with this process because it is the basis for our life together. But I do love that every three years as we preach through the lectionary, we get to engage this scripture again and re-inforce the learning – it is good to be reminded, and especially in these challenging days, when relationships are both so important and even in more danger of being neglected!

So let's attend to Jesus' teaching. When a brother or sister – or friend or relative or neighbor or acquaintance – if ANYONE offends you, breaks an expectation that you have of them...does something you never thought they would do or fails to do something that you thought they would do....are you getting the drift? If someone does anything that causes you to go, "What??? What just happened?" Go to that person and let them know!

Ahhh, the first step is often the very most difficult – and it is the one of utmost importance! When someone offends you, let them know! It is difficult to do this for any number of reasons. Primarily, I think, because it takes time. You have to drop what was on your to do list to go and attend to a person that wasn't noted in your day planner and it throws your whole schedule off. Maybe you even say to yourself, "I just don't have time for this!" Reality is, of course, you can make time now, when it is a little issue, or you can make LOTS of time later when it has moved into a huge issue, right? So much for the time excuse, as real as it is. But time isn't the only thing that can keep us from addressing broken expectations as they happen. It can also be fear. Fear that the person will not acknowledge your right to have felt let down or disappointed or hurt in any way. I don't have to give you examples – you can come up with plenty of your own I am sure, when you have gone to someone with a complaint and been told you were silly and get over it. Who needs that kind of response? So why bother, right? Well, you bother because if you don't address the issue it will bother you – you know that! It will eat on you and at you and you will become more and more uncomfortable with and around the person that you will avoid the person all together...yes? And the oddest part is **that 99 times out of 100**, the person will be clueless. Unless you let them know what you are feeling, they don't know! (And aren't you glad that everybody can't read your mind, really?)

Sometimes it seems unfair, doesn't it, that the onus for dealing with someone who hurts you is placed back on you, "the victim"? Yet this is exactly what Jesus prescribes, and in fact, it can keep a person from feeling "victimized". The one single important precursor is actually what is mentioned later in the scripture. That is, that the two of you are gathering to talk and seek reconciliation in Jesus' name. That you are asking the Father in heaven to unbind the misunderstanding and loose forgiveness into the situation. That the first step of coming to another

person is done in love and received in love and with openness of heart because Jesus is invited to the meeting and the spirit is hosting the discussion!

In the secular world, Stephen Covey wrote the book “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” a few years back. One of his seven habits is very reflective of Jesus’ first step, I think. Covey advised to “Seek first to understand, then to be understood. With a posture of trying to learn what is happening in the mind and heart of the other, with a deep listening attitude, it is possible to discern that what appeared to be a hurtful or harmful intention had a whole different source. Instead of entering into a confrontation with the goal of getting an apology from someone who had deeply wounded your heart, what would it be like to enter every encounter with one another with a deep curiosity about what the other was hoping to accomplish or communicate in their action? Our tendency to lick our wounds and pass out blame can certainly stymie Jesus’ first step towards mending relationship.

It may seem like I am spending way too long on the first step, when there are more to go, but I want to emphasize that if this first step is ignored or entered into with rigid intent, that is such a waste of time and energy! So how you even begin this first step, as the one who is hurting or disappointed, is of great import. It begins by being an invitation to another to enter into conversation about something that is important to you, valued by you, and it is a gift from the other person to spend time listening to you. That’s part of what Jesus is indicating later on in the scripture – when the two of you who are at odds can come to agreement, bind something together on earth, the father will strengthen that bond in heaven and grant you the reconciliation that you seek – if you both agree! So the first step is about achieving the desire of both persons to listen and seek to understand each other.

Sometimes, Jesus, who is a realist, says, this just isn’t going to work. Sometimes you won’t be able to find a common ground or explain the offense adequately. Sometimes the person won’t or can’t listen, and in that case, Jesus advises that you bring another along...to ‘witness’, is the word Jesus uses, and what that witness does, like in any court setting, is testify to what they have experienced. Sometimes, having someone else state what they see and hear and feel going on just helps – provides a different point of view, and can assist in mending the relationship. But sometimes another witness or two isn’t enough, and you need to bring together the whole community – not so that the whole community can gang up or split out and vote on who is right or who is wrong – that has long since ceased to be the issue. What is hoped for now is that there is somewhere, among the members of the community, someone who can give a witness in such a way that the problem can be heard and the need felt and the pain drained from its impact.

BUT if the offender can’t even hear the whole community, then Jesus says, “Let that person be as a Gentile or a tax collector to you”. For years, this part of the passage has been turned into a hammer and used as a tool for cutting off the offender, excommunicating him or her from the community. But think with me about how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors? Why the very author of this Gospel is a tax collector, Matthew, whom Jesus pursued to claim as a disciple. Jesus’ message is that we are called to never give up on anyone...maybe they can’t hear right now, Jesus would say, but try back in a month – or even a year. Possibly you have had relationships that seemed dismally broken at one time, and later, they were able to be mended so you know, it is possible. Keep at it Jesus says – never give up!

I wonder how it will be for you this week? Will the Spirit stir your heart to bring an offense or hurt feeling or deep problem to the attention of someone in your life? Will you be led to pray the Spirit’s presence and guidance in and through your words as you come to bring your issue to the table and to understand your offender?

I wonder if the Spirit will place you in a position to graciously receive the words of hurt expressed by someone who comes to you?

I wonder if you might be selected by the Spirit to interpret an event or situation on behalf of someone else – to be the witness who helps to lovingly from words and points of view that have gotten messed up and misinterpreted?

I wonder if the Spirit will tap you to be part of the bigger work of reconciliation and loving care for our neighbors, near and far across the world?

However the Spirit chooses to address and guide you in these days, I do know that in Jesus’ name and for His sake, God is ready to do and be an amazing force of love and healing in and through us. May it be so!

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