

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
Proper 14, Year A
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Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus said, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 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 Someone Hurts You

It wasn't going to be an easy conversation. So many years had passed since it all had happened. It would be easier simply to let it go. But the wound was still there. The moral injury still ached from time to time. It would come up at surprising moments as if it were something spiritual. There wasn't anything criminal or even scandalous about what had happened. It was just that she had been treated poorly by him for so long, over those formative years. He had seemed to enjoy making her feel unimportant, unvalued, unloved. Enough time had gone by now. Enough distance had been traveled. And now she had matured and could see it clearly.

She wanted him to know -- even though there was pain there -- that he was forgiven. That's where the desire to get in touch with him again had come from. Forgiveness. She had come to know more intimately God's love for her. She had come to experience God's embrace of herself even with all her own shortcomings, even with people whom she had hurt and treated poorly. A weight had lifted. A smile slowly taking shape in her soul. And she wanted to share that forgiveness with him, to share with him something of God, even if he wasn't ready or wasn't interested. She needed to try.

It all seems backwards at first when Jesus says, “If another member of the church sins against you, then go and point out the fault to them when you are alone.” Now, just as back then, the first thing to be done when someone offends you is to tell someone else about it with pleasurable disgust. And now we can do that in so many fun ways: by text or email, by video and by social media. Even if you are not the gossiping type, Jesus must have it backwards because he seems to

be saying that the impetus is on the one who has been hurt, the victim, to go to the offender and initiate that challenging and uncomfortable conversation. Could that be right? Is that possible?

These are simple verses at first glance. They seem to be so practical, offering specific steps to be taken. First do this. Second, do that. If those things don't work then here's what's next. One. Two. Three. But underneath them -- what is motivating them -- is what God did for us. Were we not trapped in sin? Were we not caught up in systems of exploitation and manipulation? Had we not offended time and again?

Yet God did not leave us there. God did not abandon us to such brokenness. Instead, God sought us out. God came and found me and found you. God began a conversation -- a hard conversation -- about forgiveness and about the nature of love. If God is willing to seek us out in the person of Jesus Christ and offer us a way back into relationship, then surely we are to do the same when we have been hurt.

Now I know and you know that sometimes it's more complicated than seeking someone out for a little chat. Sometimes there are layers and layers of pain and hurt that take years to work through. Sometimes hurts are criminal or scandalous. We can remember the wisdom of the 12-step recovery community which tells those giving up their addiction, after much hard work and community support, to ask for forgiveness from those they have hurt as long as doing so would not cause them further pain. It can be hard and the wounds can be oh so deep.

But most of the time, if we are living life in Christian community, it's not that way. Most of the time, if we share life together closely enough to step on each other's toes, then we get to take on the practice of forgiveness like a golfer working on his short game. And if God has not left us to our own devices but sought us out, then it seems something not too big for us to let a brother or sister know that we have been hurt by them and to work towards forgiveness and reconciliation.

Maybe they won't listen, you say. What do you do then? Do you remember what Jesus said to do if they won't listen to you, or to the witnesses, or even to the Church? Let that one be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector. How curious? What could that mean? Jesus says to treat them like a Gentile or a tax collector -- the very people that Jesus seemed to constantly go out of his way to love. The people that he defended to the religious leaders who thought they owned righteousness and forgiveness. If someone won't listen to you or to the church, then treat them with all the love that you can muster for an outsider or an enemy. We owe them nothing, St. Paul says this morning, except to love one another.

Of course, our Gospel does assume that life in Christian community is happening. That people are spending enough time with their church family to actually make offense. The beginning of

our reading looks so oddly paired with the ending. First, it's a message from Jesus about how to handle hurts and conflicts. If you have been hurt by someone in the Church, Jesus says, seek them out and have a conversation. *Then* the reading ends with Jesus saying, "For where two or three are gathered, I am there in the midst of them."

Perhaps it's no accident these words are paired. Could it be that Jesus is promising his presence when we go there, when we seek to make wrongs right and to enter into this challenging space? Offenses and conflict, hard conversations and forgiveness, it takes two or three, it would seem. And when we gather for it, when we share and listen, opening up about pain, exchanging currencies of forgiveness -- where two or three are gathered like that, surely, surely Christ is there in the midst of them. Amen.