

What Kind of Community Will We Be?

Matthew 18:15-20

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My college freshman roommate had just become a Christian the summer before we arrived on campus. Let's just say that he was more than excited to have found Jesus. He read his Bible more than anyone I had ever met. He plunged into a church and served all over the community. His zeal for God was admirable. But the more we talked about what we believed the more he decided that I was not a Christian. He told me that because he followed Jesus he didn't sin any more. I told him that I am in constant need of God's forgiveness because I sin everyday. This didn't go over well with him. It got to the point that at the end of every conversation that we had that involved God, he'd tell me that I was going to hell. Ouch!

He felt as though he had the right answers and I did not. It seemed that there was no way to reconcile. In retrospect, I see that his intentions were pure. He believed that he needed to save me, just like he had been saved. In his view, I was harming the church by admitting that I sin. But his approach to getting me "saved" did not draw me toward his Christian community. By the end of our first quarter living together, we didn't talk much at all.

Odds are we've all had arguments like this. Whether it is debate over religion, the role of government, or social issues; our culture feeds on a steady diet of polarizing debate that involves a lot of talking and not so much listening. It is so common these days to hear a politician sling personal attacks at their opponent simply because he or she disagrees with an idea their opponent has. What is it about our human community that causes people to be so mean so that they can feel right? Unfortunately, Christians have entered this arena of attack dog debates too – often without much reflection on how Jesus calls us to live with one another when there is disagreement.

At first glance at our gospel today, Jesus sounds like he's giving people a pass to engage in this kind of divisive discourse. Jesus says if someone sins against you go and point out their sin. If they don't listen to you, take it to others that will listen and if the person doesn't hear at that point, then take it to the whole church – if they don't listen - you can treat them like a Gentile or a tax collector. It almost sounds like religious hazing.

It also sounds like legal advice. If someone doesn't like the result of the first court ruling, take it to a higher court, if they won't listen to your side then - take it to the Supreme Court.

The problem is that escalating legal maneuvers don't engender trust and almost never lead to restored relationships. They don't allow for honesty. These power plays set up systems of deceit and dysfunction. There is no room to grow together when winning is the primary objective. Ultimately, power plays like these are not sustainable. Jesus doesn't enter the Christian community by power or for the purpose of punishing those who have sinned. Jesus comes to restore sinners, and that's everyone, to the community where the truth is spoken in love and where sin can be handled with humility and understanding.

Jesus gives us a simple way to deal with sin in the community. "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." Immediately before this passage, Jesus tells a parable that goes like this: "If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost."

God is relentless in finding us when we get lost. And Jesus calls us as the church to take up this work of seeking out those who have been separated from us so that we can rejoice with God when reconciliation occurs and a member is restored to the church. The church hasn't always been so great at this. The other day I was talking to my 90-year-old neighbor. She was telling me how she believes deeply in Jesus, but hasn't been to church much in 70 years. She would go occasionally when she was married to her first husband, but stopped going all together after they divorced in the early 40s. The weight of shame and the judgment of the church were too much. When she remarried, her husband didn't belong to a church anymore either. He had been told during the depression that he and his family weren't giving enough to the church. There wasn't anything more to give. Nobody had any money, but the pastor wouldn't listen.

I meet people all the time who have left the church – but not always left the faith. Some left because they just don't see the point. Others left when they moved to another town and never thought to look for a church. But the majority of people I meet left the church because for some reason or another they got the message that they didn't fit or they weren't good enough. They felt judged or labeled by well meaning people who sat next to them in the pews or who preached from pulpits. When I talk to these folks I tell them how sorry I am that they were treated the way they were. In many cases, I confess that the church has screwed up and probably will again because we're only people trying to make our way through a messy world the best we can. And sometimes we miss the mark of what it means to live faithfully as the church in a messy world. The people that have heard this confession often appreciate the honesty and humility. And hearing the confession, maybe they catch a glimpse of themselves being part of the faith community again.

Confessing is central to the Christian community. Without it, we can't fully know ourselves. We can't fully experience the freedom that God gives us. We can't build authentic relationships - with people or God. When we confess we tell the truth so that

God can transform us from death into life, from isolated individuality to restored community. Confessing takes faith – faith to trust that when we open our lives to others we will find love rather than judgment. We take time in worship to confess because we need to be reminded that our job in life is not to be perfect; no matter how hard we try. Rather, our job is to acknowledge as a community our need for God’s grace. We confess together because there is no where else to turn where the promise of grace is so certain. In our confession we hear the promise from God that in Jesus Christ, we are restored, we are renewed, and that God is forming us, the church, into a new community that reflects God’s restorative work in the world.

This is good news for us and for the world. We are on the cusp of a very busy time for all of us. School starts this week and with it all the extra activities too. During the busyness that happens in this change of season, we are bound to make mistakes. We are bound not to have enough time for a child, a spouse, a co-worker or friend. Our relationships may be stretched, even strained. But God has claimed us and called us into this community where grace is freely offered and second chances are never ending.

We need this, the world needs this. People spend too much time making judgments of who’s right and who’s wrong. Many of us don’t feel as though there is enough room to breathe in our lives. And the demands of keeping up with the Joneses never seem to fade. God breaks into this messy world with a way to find one another even when we’ve not gotten it all right. Jesus calls it the church. And in spite of all the disagreements that can exist when people gather, Jesus makes his home among us and all our messes, as we come to agree on one thing - that it is he who has the power to make us a community we can all live with. Amen.

