

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
September 4, 2011
Matthew 18:15-20
Romans 13:8-14
“Amazing Things...Together”
Pastor John Guthrie

Two tourists from New Jersey were traveling through Utah, visiting all of the famous sites. One day they were traveling down Hwy 36 approaching Tooele, when they began arguing over the proper pronunciation of the town. This argument went on for a long time, until finally the pair reached the town, pulled into the parking lot of a local restaurant, and went inside.

The attendant asked the men what they would like, and one of the men replied, “Before we order, my friend and I would like for you to settle an argument we have been having. Could you please very slowly and carefully pronounce the name of this place?” The attendant looked very confused for a second or two, but finally he replied, “Daaairy Queen.”

Today's passage from Matthew begins with a disagreement between two members of the church. That translation is unfortunate, really, because in the original Greek the disagreement is between two brothers, or it could be between two sisters, just as easily. The point is, the disagreement is not just between two members of the church, but between two members who are like brothers or sisters to one another. Which is, of course, the way that we are to consider those who share the worship and ministry of this church. Those sitting around you are your brothers and sisters.

Before we go any further, it is once again worth the time and trouble to set the context for this teaching. The first part of Chapter 18 in Matthew's gospel reads very much like instructions to leaders in the church. So, for example, in the first few verses the disciples come to Jesus and ask him, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus replies by setting a child in the middle of them and telling them that whoever is humble like that child, that is who is greatest in the kingdom. So: Leaders in the mold of Christ are humble.

Jesus then continues teaching in the same vein by telling his disciples that anyone who places a stumbling block in the path of little ones who believe in him would be better off if a great millstone were tied around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. Here “little ones” are new believers, those who have not yet developed spiritually, what a friend of mine calls “baby Christians.” So leaders in the mold of Jesus will do nothing to cause new Christians to stumble or fall.

Then there is a parable about a shepherd who goes out searching for one lost sheep, leaving ninety-nine others behind. Not too long ago we looked at that parable and decided that it makes no economic sense whatsoever. What if ten sheep in the flock wander off and get eaten by wolves while the shepherd is off searching for that one sorry sheep? It makes no sense at all. But Jesus says to his disciples, “It is not the will of your Father that even one of these little ones should go astray.” So leaders in the mold of Christ care for every sheep, from the least to the greatest.

After these things, Jesus comes to today's lesson about two brothers or sisters who have differences. What has actually happened, of course, is that one of the brothers or sisters has sinned against the other. The text reads, “If another brother or sister sins against you...” So in keeping with the previous verses in chapter 18, Jesus is instructing his disciples on the way in which leaders are to resolve

disputes with local churches. Like ours!

There is something very interesting in the Greek texts that we have regarding that particular verse. Some of the Greek texts have “against you” and some of them do not. The difference is not trivial, because without it the verse begins, “If another brother or sister sins...” Boy. That should give all of us pause to tremble, because which one of us never sins? You know the answer to that one. Psalm 14 and Paul's letter to the Romans and the First Letter of John and lots of other passages are very clear about that: we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. All of us.

At any rate, Jesus tells his disciples that, in the church when one sister has been injured by another, there is a four-step procedure to be followed. First, the injured party goes alone to speak to the one who has inflicted the injury. If there is no resolution, then the one injured takes a friend or two to confront the other. If that doesn't work, then the matter is to be brought before the entire church. And if the sinner after all of that still has not repented and made amends, then he or she is to be shunned, treated like a Gentile or a tax collector.

This procedure indeed appears to be very sound. What is obvious throughout, until the last step, if that becomes necessary, is that the community, that is the church, is striving earnestly to restore the sinner into the community. The objective is not to justify the one who has been injured. The objective is not for the injured party to receive some kind of reparation. The objective is not to punish the sinner. The objective throughout is to promote healing, peace, and restoration. This purpose is critically important. More important than the four-step procedure is the purpose of restoring the peace and harmony of the community, that is, the church.

I would guess that there are very few of you who have never been injured or grieved by a brother or sister in our church or in another. As you review one or two of those instances, think about how you handled the situation. I would guess you did not mechanically follow the four-step method Jesus sets out in this passage. By the way, the whole purpose of the method is that you never get to step four, of course. But if you didn't rigidly follow the method that Jesus sets forth, did you at the very least have in mind restoring the relationship between yourself and the one who injured you?

At the heart of the matter is not the relationship between two individuals, but rather the impact that a poisoned relationship has on the whole community. If a particular church becomes so filled with animosity from sisters and brothers holding grudges, the church cannot be a loving and effective witness to Christ. If it is filled with bickering and hostility and enmity, quite frankly, it is no longer a faithful outpost of Christ's love in the world. So the procedure that Jesus lays out is really, at its center, a way of preserving the harmony, witness, and ministry of the church as a whole. And that's why it is so critical to resolve hurts and injuries before they fester and cause the church as a whole to suffer.

Jesus then says to his friends, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose (or release) on earth will be released in heaven.” That's a very strange and troubling thing for Jesus to say, but in context it's not quite so difficult. If individuals and churches are able to restore a sinner to full communion, then that person is restored to full communion in heaven as well. But if individuals and churches fail to restore one who has fallen away, then that one remains estranged in heaven, too. What's troubling about this understanding is that we believe in a sovereign God who can save and restore anyone. Does God surrender that authority to us weak, fallible, broken, sinful human beings?

No. Rather, I think what Jesus means is that we are to treat injuries and sins in the church as if they had eternal consequences. Obviously not all injuries are as serious or potentially harmful to the community as others, but Jesus tells us that we are to be aware of them and to handle them wisely

and above all, with compassion and with sensitivity to the one who needs healing and restoring.

Obviously we cannot take the next statement literally, either: "Truly I tell you," Jesus says, "if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven." If that were literally true, two of you could agree to ask for a new Mercedes and take turns driving it. Or you could ask together for a resolution to the famine currently taking the lives of tens of thousands in east Africa, and it would be so. This theme of asking and receiving appears in at least two other places in Matthew, and understanding it is not simple. In the context of what has gone before in this passage, it seems that Jesus is once again reminding the disciples, and us, that the restoration of an erring brother or sister is of critical importance.

No one is going to claim that this process is easy. Some of us are better at handling conflict than others. Some of us face it head-on, and others of us are extremely uncomfortable with it. I can tell you with certainty that this teaching is very hard for me. Jesus says, just do it: restore the sinner, heal the rift, make the community whole.

By the way, in the passage that follows this one Jesus takes up the topic of forgiveness. That's the place where Peter comes to Jesus and asks him how many times he must forgive a sister or brother who sins against him. Is seven a good number? Jesus replies, "Not seven, but seventy-seven." That passage is for next week, but just a reminder here that forgiveness is critical in this process of restoring individuals, and healing communities.

At the end of all these difficult things, Jesus gives his disciples, and us, a bit of terrific news. "Wherever two or three of you are gathered in my name," he says, "I am there among them." So this difficult, painful work of restoring and healing is not just up to us. Christ himself is with us and among us always when we are gathered in his name, and Christ's love and authority are ours. We are not left alone.

That's a good thing, because if we had to do the impossible work of healing, restoring, and forgiving on our own, we wouldn't have a chance. But we're not on our own, and therefore, we can do the impossible. Thank you, Jesus.