

Holding Each Other Accountable
A Sermon on Matthew 18:15-20
Proper 18
September 10, 2023

Introduction

Matthew talks about how to resolve conflict in a church. It is part of the Community Discourse, one of the five great discourses in the Gospel of Matthew. It is an extended discussion about sin and forgiveness in the church. Today we hear about sin. Next week: forgiveness.

It is hard to confront anyone about a sin they have committed without offending them. *How arrogant for someone to suggest that I have sinned!* It is especially hard for the minister to approach a member of the congregation. They are just as likely to get mad and leave the church as they are to listen.

Church discipline is a lost art. Today we talk instead about holding each other accountable. Discipline carries hierarchical connotations: someone higher up than you is correcting your behavior. Accountability sounds more like a suggestion. It is a kinder, gentler form of discipline.

First Move: A Deliberate Process

Today's text starts with a premise that still holds true. If you are upset with someone, it is better to talk to them about it than to let it fester. If you keep letting things go, they may build up until you explode in anger.

The Sermon on the Mount has a good example, just before it says, "Turn the other cheek":

If you offer your gift upon the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there in front of the altar, and go away first and be reconciled to your brother, and then go and offer your gift.

You are not in the proper spirit for worship if you are still upset about the sin. Ephesians 4:26 expresses the same thought: "Be angry, but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger."

We are going to get angry at times. The issue becomes, what are we going to do with that anger? We may get violent unless we find a way to channel it into something constructive.

Matthew suggests that we talk to the person that sinned against us. He says, “Rebuke him,” but that is too strong in our culture. [I’ll refer to that person as *he* because Matthew does.] Talk to him about it. Let him know that you are upset. It is better to be vulnerable with him than angry or scolding.

The duty to confront and reprove a brother is deeply rooted in Judaism. It is linked in Leviticus 19:18 to the command to “love your neighbor as yourself”:

You shall not hate in your heart any one of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

We are acting out of love for our neighbor by confronting or reproofing them when they sin against us. When we see a neighbor commit a sin, we must act to keep it from being repeated.

Matthew also suggests to talk to him alone, just the two of you. Don’t try to shame him. This is consistent with Jewish teaching in the Talmud: “One who humiliates another before the multitudes has no share in the World-to-Come.” Sanhedrin 107:a11.

The New Testament does not speak with one voice on these matters. Paul says something different in Romans 12:20: “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 says:

Have nothing to do with them so they may be ashamed. Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.

Shame might be a helpful strategy against a politician or a public figure, but not against a friend. Shaming a person is a good way to turn a friend into an enemy. He will be overcome with the instinct to defend himself and justify his behavior.

Matthew’s intent is not to punish the person who sinned, but to give him an opportunity to repent. The point is to restore the relationship. “If he listens to you, you have gained a brother.” That is the theory that underlies restorative justice: we are trying more to restore the broken relationship than to punish.

The punishment comes when the sinner listens to you and understands the harm he has caused. He feels your pain. Then he will regret his action and try to make amends with you.

Matthew says, If he doesn't listen to you, then take it up a step. Bring one or two witnesses. In Jewish law the one or two witnesses are to verify that you brought the sin to his attention and gave him a chance to repent. It is an act of grace: it makes it harder to condemn a person. He must first be warned by two witnesses before he can be legally condemned.

If he still refuses to listen, Matthew suggests taking the matter to the entire church. The church gives the sinner one last opportunity to repent. If not, he is excommunicated. The church is maintaining its integrity. It will not tolerate that type of behavior if it is intentional and the sinner is unrepentant. The sins obviously would be something significant, not a trivial offense, something like the list of sins that Paul mentions in today's epistle lesson.

Expulsion from the congregation would have been more significant in the first century. There were few house churches of Christ followers in the empire. In many towns there was only one house church. You would have had to leave the movement or move to another village. Today there are so many churches that the unrepentant sinner would simply leave the church and go to another. Or maybe give up on church altogether.

Matthew sets forth a step-by-step process that is deliberate, persistent and time-consuming. Tom Long, one of the most popular preachers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), says that no one is written off in haste, no one slams the door in another's face in rage. Relationships are precious and enduring. When relationships are broken, they are worth mending.

Matthew also shows us that sin is relational. Sin is not a matter between an individual and God. Sin has ripple effects on the whole church. To be Christian is to be bound together in community. When sheep stray from the flock, we go after them. We pray to Our Father not My Father. Our Joys and Concerns affect all of us.

Second Move: Where Two or Three Are Gathered

This text focuses more on the person who has been sinned against than the person who sinned. We know that if we have sinned, we should repent. If we have been sinned against, we approach the person for two reasons: so that the anger won't fester within us and so that the person won't commit the same sin with other members of the congregation. We should care enough about the person who sinned that we

bring it to their attention. That may be a difficult conversation, and it is easy to put it off and never have it.

A lot of parents put off having that conversation with their children and don't do enough to help them build values. That is an opportunity that we lose forever.

We are on a journey together with other members of the congregation. The New Testament uses kinship language for the congregation: we are brothers and sisters in Christ, we are all beloved children of God. We care about the members of the congregation, just as we care about our brothers and sisters.

If we are going to be a healthy community, we care enough about each other to hold each other accountable. We do it with all humility. The Community Discourse begins a few verses earlier when the disciples ask Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus takes a child and says, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

We hold each other accountable by searching after each other when we wander off, as in the Parable of the Lost Sheep. The sin could be the sign of a deeper problem. The sinner may be upset about something and finally explode. The presenting problem masks the real problem. Or the sinner may be oblivious to how inconsiderate he or she can be to people. You may be saving him or her from offending other people.

I look back at some of the things I did in my 20's, and I wish someone had cared enough to point them out to me. Now I have a wife who will happily point out to me when I have sinned against her.

That is one thing that small groups are helpful with. I was in a small group, an Emmaus reunion group, at First Christian Church of Edmond. We had all gone on the Walk to Emmaus, an ecumenical ministry of the United Methodist Church. The reunion group met once a week for 90 minutes. Eight to 10 of us met each week. We would go around the table and respond to two questions: when was I closest to God this week and when was I farthest away from God. We would listen to each other and help each us find God. It helped keep us from straying.

This congregation has tried to do something similar with Triplet groups on and off over the years. It's been a while since we have had them. Triplets are a group of three people that meet at each other's houses a few times. If we are going to do Triplet groups again we need to decide whether they are for fellowship and getting to know each other or for accountability. I got a lot of my Emmaus group. I was in it for five years, every Saturday morning at 8:30. I would urge you to consider making it an accountability group. You could ask the same two questions: when was I nearest to God and farthest away from God this week.

Holding each other accountable outside a small group is harder. We expect it and want it in a small group. I appreciate that in Matthew it is any member of the congregation that has an obligation to correct the others instead of leaving it to the elders to do. Church discipline used to be part of an elder's duties in Stone Campbell churches and I am glad it is a thing of the past. It is still practiced in Churches of Christ. I had a friend at First Christian who belonged to Edmond Church of Christ when her children were little. She dropped her son off at the church daycare on her way to a tennis date. An elder told her not to come into the church in a tennis skirt again. She didn't either. That was the last time she went in the church, period.

The democratizing of the practice takes the hierarchy out of the process and opens the way for humility instead. Having a conversation one-on-one in private also helps. So does showing that you have genuine concern.

It can be a time of instruction. Matthew closes this text with the memorable passage: "For where two or three have gathered in my name, I am there in [the] midst of them." This is a very Jewish thought. Gathered is a translation of the Greek verb, *συνάγω*, which literally means *synagogued*. To gather together, to bring together, to reconcile. Matthew is drawing from Jewish teaching that was later set down in the Talmud: "If two sit together and there are words of Torah [spoken] between them, then the Shekinah abides among them." Pirkei Avot 3.2. Shekinah is a Hebrew word that means settling or dwelling. It denotes the presence of God. Matthew understands the correcting of the sin of another as instruction in how to behave. The presence of Jesus is with us when we correct each other in the right spirit.

I saw an example of this in a baseball game this weekend. Runners were on first and third and they tried a double steal. The runner at first tried to steal second, hoping to draw a throw so that the runner at third could steal home. A young second baseman took the throw from the catcher and was preoccupied with trying to tag the runner at second instead of throwing home to stop the other runner from scoring. When they got to the dugout, the veteran first baseman took the young second baseman aside and explained to him how to handle that type of play. There was no scolding, just gentle words of instruction. For those of you keeping score at home, it was a St. Louis Cardinals game. The young second baseman was Nolan Gorman. The veteran first baseman was Paul Goldschmidt. That is also an example of how a sin or a mistake can affect the whole group.

Conclusion

When we think of sin in the New Testament, the image that comes to mind is John the Baptist calling the people a brood of vipers. Matthew has a different method of calling out sin. If we can approach each other with humility and compassion, we just might find that Jesus is in the midst of us when we hold each other accountable.

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