

“THE DIRECT APPROACH”

Matthew 18:15-20

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“This is the church; this is the steeple; open the doors, and there’s all the people.” Many of us learned that little ditty as children; and if we were paying attention, it taught us a valuable lesson. It taught us that the church is more than a building or an institution; it is a community of flesh-and-blood human beings.

“But, ay, there’s the rub.” Most of us later learned just how human church folks can be. As one cynic famously put it, “The church would be great if it weren’t for the people”! Yes, church people can be gracious, selfless, and loving; but they – or I should say “we” – can also be arrogant, petty, and contentious. The truth is that the “communion of the saints” is still a bunch of sinners – forgiven and redeemed sinners, to be sure, but still capable of engaging in self-destructive or hurtful behavior. The question becomes, how does a community of faith respond to such unfaithful behavior and thereby try to become more faithful? As it turns out, churches respond in a variety of ways, some of which are not so helpful.

Scenario Number One: In the Church of Scotland, not too many centuries ago, a member who had sinned had to confess that sin before the assembled session. Particularly if the offense was a sexual transgression, the member had to stand at the door of the church on the next Lord’s Day, clad in an iron collar, and express apology to every person who entered the church.

Scenario Number Two: A Methodist seminary professor was teaching a course in ethics. He asked his students to present a case study of some ethical dilemma in which they were involved. They had to tell what happened, how they responded, and then the group analyzed their responses. At the end of the semester, the professor noted an interesting pattern among the students. When they became aware of the wrongdoing of a fellow student – say, a friend was dealing drugs, or driving drunk, or cheating on an exam – they avoided confronting the offender. They justified their lack of intervention by saying things like, “He was my best friend.” “Who am I to judge?” “I feared if I said anything, she would get mad and never speak to me again.” Mind you, these were seminary students – future ministers and church leaders – who were making this choice to remain silent.

Scenario Number Three: A prominent officer in a congregation sent an email to a fellow member reading him the riot act for failing to follow through on a volunteer assignment. The accused person felt humiliated and unfairly treated. He had been unable to keep his commitment because he was distracted by the illness of his wife and by his own difficulties at work. He felt too hurt and angry to respond directly to his accuser. Instead, he made phone calls to several church friends to complain about the man who had offended him so deeply.

Which leads me to ask you: when you see someone in our church doing something that you disagree with or is flat-out wrong, how do you respond? Do you judge their behavior; and, if so, to whom do you express your judgment? More specifically, when someone wrongs you personally, how do you handle your grievance? Do you hold your feelings inside and let them fester? Do you talk behind that person’s back and try to muster support from others for your

complaint? Or, do you go directly to the person who has offended you, state your grievance honestly, and try to resolve the situation?

Today's Gospel lesson from Matthew reflects a time when the followers of Jesus are no longer a ragtag group of disciples; they have become a "church," an organized community struggling to remain faithful as individuals and as a group, struggling to get along with each other and accomplish their sacred mission. It's no wonder that they are "struggling," because the church back then and the church today is made up of people who are imperfect, who still commit moral blunders and fail to love others as they love themselves. As a Norwegian bishop once put it, "In baptism, the old person goes under, but the old person can still swim." Apparently, Matthew's church has some folks who are swimming for their lives, who are exhibiting behaviors more associated with the old creation than the new one. So, how is the church supposed to deal with members who have gone morally astray or who are causing harm to others in the community? Well, what we have in today's text is the counsel of the risen Christ to the early church about how to respond to such offenders.

The first thing we notice is that the living Christ takes sin seriously. He does not subscribe to the notion that "anything goes" in the life of the church. Christ's love is unconditional, but it is "tough love" – a love that creates standards for how we conduct our personal lives and how we relate to others, and then holds his followers accountable for meeting those standards. By definition, faith communities have boundaries, and when those boundaries are violated, individuals get hurt and communities become toxic, and the church must draw a line in the sand.

Such a stance is counter-cultural in our time because we live in a multi-cultural society where tolerance is regarded as a supreme virtue. For many today, the one moral absolute is the rigidly enforced conviction that any judgment about the behavior of others is to be avoided. This we call being "gracious," "open," "accepting," and "tolerant." But exercising tolerance does not mean that all judgment should be suspended. It does not mean that all cultures are equal, especially if a culture is unjust, discriminatory, or violent. Tolerance does not mean that all beliefs are the same and all lifestyles are appropriate. There can be no community worthy of the name, no connection that is deep and authentic, without truthfulness. And there can be no truthfulness without judgment, without that painful willingness to confront. Judgment, the assignment of right and wrong, the acknowledgement of a genuine injustice, the naming of a real hurt, the telling of a hard truth, the challenge to a blatant offender, can be an act of deepest love – and it is especially so in the life of the church.

At same time, the risen Christ recognizes that the church can respond to offenders in ways that are also offensive, that only compound the original wrongdoing and the harm it causes. In Scenario Number One, the offending party is publicly shamed by the church, an action which cannot bring real healing to anyone involved. In Scenario Number Two, the offense is minimized and the offender is let off the hook – his or her friends just look the other way. In Scenario Number Three, the offender gets rightly criticized by a fellow church member; however, the criticism is not voiced directly to the offender, but to others in the church, so the toxin just spreads throughout the body. Dare I say that all three of these scenarios sound painfully familiar. Which one of us hasn't cast the first stone at a sinner, or discounted the gravity of a sin, or castigated a sinner from a safe distance?

The living Christ tells us that there is a better way of responding to wrongdoing – a way that takes sin seriously but also respects the sinner and leads to reconciliation. In today's next,

notice that it is the offended party who is to take the initiative to resolve the dispute. There is no room in the teaching of Jesus or in the conduct of the Christian life for sitting around, licking wounds, and sighing, “Poor me.” One cannot always avoid being a victim, but one can avoid the victim mentality. Jesus calls for the offended party to assume responsibility, not for the offense itself but for the treatment of the offense. When one is harmed by a member of the faith community, the operating principles in the action one takes are care and respect, both for the offender and for the entire church.

Therefore, Jesus counsels the “direct approach.” The offended party takes his or her grievance straight to the one who has committed the offense and speaks his or her truth – with no delay, no skirting of the issue, no criticism behind the back of the wrongdoer. The matter is settled privately, if possible, and if not, in the presence of “one or two others” (Matthew 18:16). If these steps fail, then and only then is the matter taken to the whole church.

Now, you may be thinking that this sort of scenario occurs rarely in Christian congregations today. Only once in a blue moon do churches find it necessary to discipline their members for unworthy conduct. No one was forced to stand at the entrance to our worship space today wearing an iron collar!

However, it strikes me that Jesus’s approach is helpful not only in dealing with glaring transgressions like sexual misconduct or financial malfeasance; it is also helpful in dealing with common conflicts among church members, like disagreements over biblical interpretation or social ethics or church policy. The fact is, when people differ with us on important issues, we tend to take these disagreements personally, because our convictions and values are a large part of who we are. When our beliefs are challenged, our very personhood feels challenged. It becomes hard to separate a disagreement from a personal grievance, and we find ourselves in the same situation that Jesus addresses here in Matthew’s Gospel.

I offer a case in point which is literally right under our noses. Several months ago, message signs were posted on our church lawn – first, in support of essential workers during the pandemic; and then later, in support of those who are targets of racial injustice. When the signs addressing racism appeared, four church members contacted me to express their displeasure. Now, let me be absolutely clear: all four persons are dear friends of mine; they are committed Christians and valued servants in our congregation. I would never suspect any of them of being racist, much less accuse them of being so. They simply interpreted the signs differently than I did and found them to be offensive. They objected, not to the biblical ideals of equality and justice, but to other, more inflammatory messages they felt were conveyed by the signs. My own view is that there was no intent in the signs to proclaim a radical or unchristian agenda. We talked and we listened to each other, and we ultimately agreed to disagree.

However, I came away from those conversations with even more respect for these four individuals than I had before – not because they came around to my point of view, but because they had the courage to come to me with their point of view. When they disagreed with the church’s witness, they came straight to the church’s pastor with their disagreement. They took the direct approach, which helped to clear the air and also opened the way for further discussion and clarification. As a direct consequence of the honesty of these four members, the Church Council created an ad hoc committee to develop policies for displaying message signs in the future. This process may not lead to a complete consensus, but I hope it will lead to reconciliation within our diverse congregation.

Friends, a reconciled church is not a church where everyone sees the same issue in the same way. It is a church where individuals speak their truth candidly, confront their differences, and find common ground in a gospel of love. It is the kind of church Jesus envisions, and I commend his approach to myself and to all of you.