

Matthew 18:15-20/Sept. 6, 2020

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I remember thinking that life in the early church must have been a utopia. Everyone getting along and loving each other. No one hurting one another, because they knew the love of Jesus first hand. I mean, he was right there with them!

But, based on the Gospel for today, we can gather that that wasn't the case at all, because Jesus had to explain to the disciples how church members need to reconcile with each other.

And you'll notice that I use the word reconcile, not "forgive," because in the church, it seems to me, forgiveness is not the same as being reconciled. Too often people will "forgive," and not really forgive at all. They'll just pretend it never happened or assume they deserved what they got.

But, God is all about reconciliation - the restoring of relationships. It's always about relationships restored. That's what the cross is all about.

And, without the reconciliation part of forgiveness, relationships can actually be torn apart instead of being brought back together. When we "forgive" without doing the hard work of reconciliation, we often end up hating the other person who wronged us, and they may not even know what they did that caused damage to the relationship.

It's really important that we, as Christians, learn to say - "You hurt me." "I'm really sorry," and, "You are forgiven." I know we like to think that actions speak loud enough, but these are words we actually need to hear. That's why we have confession and forgiveness nearly every worship service.

For premarital and marital pastoral care, I use a program called Prepare/Enrich. Prepare for marriage or Enrich marriages that already exist. For Prepare/Enrich, each member of the couple does an on line survey and then we talk about the results. Not what was said necessarily, but where they seemed to not be in agreement, because that gives them opportunities to practice communication skills, and successful relationships rely on good communication.

Often within couples there is the assertive person and the one who prefers not to have any sort of confrontation, and believe it or not, having two assertive people

actually makes for a happier couple, because they are willing to go the distance to work things out.

Assertive people will always say what is on their mind. But, people who do not like confrontation, on the other hand, will likely say nothing. So, one of the exercises we do in the premarital classes is to practice being assertive and then also listening, because some times the assertive person will not listen, because they are convinced that they already know everything.

When we do these exercises, it's always fun to see when the assertive person learns something new. It's a good lesson for them to have before the marriage. It keeps them humble so that they will actually listen to their partner and make sure they understand them before making assumptions.

So, we practice, over and over again for 6 weeks. The avoidance person is taught to say what is really on their mind and the aggressive person is taught to repeat what they heard so that the other person can clarify what they mean. It is a really important exercise, and it's fascinating to see how often we put assumptions on what people are saying without really listening to what they have to say. We all have filters through which we put information, and when we are really mad at someone, we can take their best of intentions and turn them into being evil.

A while ago, one of the members at my home congregation offered me a gift, but I took it as an offense. There was a new program in the synod and being the congregation that I grew up in, they wanted to gift me the registration for the class. At that point in time I was really stressed, feeling unappreciated and over worked, and when she offered for Advent to pay for the class all I heard is – “you suck as a pastor.”

In defensiveness, I rejected the offer, didn't take the class, and damaged the relationship. And things are still awkward between us, because I realize now that I interpreted a gift as something other than a gift. I've always told you I have a problem with number 8 – assuming the best of other people's intentions. And now a number of years have passed. Does she even remember? Did she take it as an offense? The next time I see her I certainly plan to apologize and find out, because it is never too late to restore a relationship.

So, the best thing we can do when we've been hurt is to go to the person who hurt us and talk about it – to speak and be heard. To say, “I've been hurt,” and give the

opportunity for someone else to say, “I’m sorry.” And they may even say, “I was hurt” too.

I worked at camp with one of my college roommates. I was working with the younger kids and she was working with the much older kids. Because we were in different realms, we didn’t talk much and it seemed to me that whenever we were in the same vicinity she didn’t want to talk to me.

One night there was a staff telescope party where we gathered on top of the boat house to see some astrological event. Because it was my night off and a gorgeous night I just stayed up on the roof after others had returned to their cabins. In the end, it was just my former roommate and me.

To my shock, she asked me why I wasn’t talking to her. She thought I was jealous of her, because she had been voted a mentor for one of the camp groups. When she said that, it really opened things up and I told her how I thought she didn’t want to talk to me, because she was in with the in crowd. With that we both laughed, and hugged, and the relationship was restored. If that event hadn’t of happened, we probably would have left camp no longer being friends.

I know it’s hard to do the difficult conversations, but they restores relationships, and Jesus is all about restoring relationships. That’s why he died on the cross – to reconcile all people to God and thereby to one another. When Adam damaged our relationship with God, all relationships were damaged. But, through Christ, our relationship with God has been reconciled so that all of our other relationships can be made whole as well.

So, in the church we reconcile. We restore relationships. And again – this does not mean that anyone is to suffer abuse. That is never ok, and Jesus makes it clear here that the congregation is to always be on the side of the one who has been hurt, not that we give up on the oppressor, but we definitely do not allow the one who has been hurt to continually be hurt.

The oppressor, Jesus says, is to be like a Gentile or tax collector, and we know how Jesus treated them. He ate with them regularly in order to bring healing to them as well. Jesus is an equal opportunity healer, who is always on the side of the oppressed. The oppressed being the one who is being sinned against.

Sin is anything that destroys a relationship, and they’re pretty much all summed up in the 10 Commandments. It starts off when we think that we are God, that we have control and that the whole universe revolves around us. It proceeds then from

there in how we treat others. Sin is always putting ourselves ahead of anyone else by taking what has been given to them, whether it be reputation, things, or people, in order to make us feel superior to that person. Sin is always when we are more concerned with our status than someone else's well-being.

So, Jesus says – when someone has sinned against you – hurt you and the relationship you have with them – go tell them. Give them the opportunity to say that they are sorry so that your relationship can be restored. And if this is a deep seeded behavior, it may actually restore other relationships they have, because they can recognize it and stop doing it.

But, if they cannot admit to you, one on one, that they have damaged your relationship, take people that love both of you so that that person can see relationships in action.

If they still cannot admit they have done anything wrong, and the two witnesses agree that you have been wronged, allow the whole congregation, all of the relationships you share, be witness to the importance of loving one another. I know that sounds crazy, but when done from a place of love, not a place of judgment, it's healing. It's meant to bring wholeness, not division. That's Christ in action.

And, if that person still refuses to admit any wrong doing, they are not kicked out. We stick with them, because it's all about restoring relationships, not destroying relationships. Jesus ate with Gentiles and tax collectors in order to bring them back into the fold – back into God's loving relationship. Have you ever noticed that people who think they are unworthy of love can be destructive? But, God loves everyone, and as his disciples, we are called to proclaim that love in word and action.

Relationships are not only earthly, they are heavenly as well. Right relationships are of God, the triune God, who is relationship, and through Christ they are known here on earth – on earth as in heaven.

When we gather together in love, Christ is with us, living in that relationship, so that we can restore relationships just as Christ has done for us. It's all about reconciliation – being made right with one another.

Jesus Christ is God's love personified, and that love changes everything.

Thanks be to God. Amen.