

THE BRIDGE TO SOMEWHERE

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Matthew 18:15-20 (NRSV)

"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. [16] But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. [17] If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. [18] Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. [19] Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. [20] For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

THE BRIDGE TO NOWHERE

Have you heard about the "bridge to nowhere? That's the bridge that they wanted to build in Alaska. It wasn't needed. It helped very few people. And it would have cost this country a great deal of money.

Fortunately this potential boondoggle was eventually exposed and stopped. But, it has become the poster child to emphasize a political problem. Politicians often add something called "earmarks" to a bill right before it is passed. It is money that goes to the member's home district to fund a pet project.

Sometimes it's even a project that the people in that district don't even want. But, since the earmark is made at the last minute most members of Congress don't even notice that this expensive addition has been made.

How can this happen? Why would somebody do something like this? You have to say that it is because some politicians put their own self-interest above everything else. It's all about them and their re-election.

And I would say that when they do that they not only cheapen their own reputation; they also harm the country as a whole. Those who are cynical might even say that politics in general has become about building a bridge to nowhere ... trying to get our way at the expense of everyone else.

You'll be relieved to know that I'm not going to offer a political speech about pork barrel spending this morning. I suspect most of us have heard enough political speeches to last a lifetime over the past few weeks.

But, I would like to use that infamous "bridge to nowhere" as a symbol of how things go

wrong not only in our country but also in our lives as well. Bridges are supposed to connect people. Bridges are supposed to bring people together and make new opportunities possible.

When I was growing up Simon and Garfunkel sang longingly about that bridge over troubled water, and we all wanted to sing along. We really wanted to change the world in a positive way. We really wanted to be peacemakers, to build that bridge over troubled water and change things for the better.

And yet, it seems like this is the one bridge we can never build.

Instead of building a bridge over troubled water it seems like we are always building a bridge to nowhere. We are always talking past each other instead of talking to each other. And that's true not only when it comes to politics and society in general; that's true in the church as well.

Jesus said blessed are the peacemakers, but if you look at the history of the church both past and present, peacemaking doesn't seem to be our priority. We are not who we are called to be. There's a big gap between the gospel of forgiveness that we preach and the way we live our lives. Instead of building bridges in the name of Christ we are often busy building bridges to nowhere in the name of self-interest.

Surely we know that this harms not only ourselves but the witness of the church as well. How can we talk about the forgiveness of Christ in the world when we have not forgiven the sins of a brother or sister in the family of faith, the church?

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The word "church" means those who are called by Jesus to live in a way that is different. And in today's lesson we learn specifically what that means.

The disciples of Jesus cannot allow themselves to just preach forgiveness as a great idea. The bridge over troubled water is something that we are to construct today by taking personal responsibility for the relationships in our life that are broken by sin.

And Jesus suggests what might seem like a radical way of dealing with this problem. Go directly to the person with whom you have a problem in private and try to work it out.

Now whenever I preach on this passage I always see some looks of discomfort on the faces of my parishioners. Almost everyone can think of someone with whom they have a problem and the thought of going to that person and honestly talking about a broken relationship does not sound very appealing.

Quite often people tell me that our teaching and preaching in the church needs to be more concrete. We need to say specifically what we should do to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. We need to get away from high minded generalities and make faith more practical. Well, this is one of the most practical and specific passages in the whole Bible and the responses to this passage are often the same,

"Going to a person with whom I have a problem doesn't seem like a good idea to me.

Suppose things get worse? Maybe it would be best to downplay our differences instead of going directly to the person with whom we have a problem."

OIL ON TROUBLED WATERS

We even have a phrase for this approach. It's called pouring oil on troubled waters.

I have long believed that this may be the worst thing to do when there is conflict. We tell people in effect,

"Push those angry feelings down. Don't talk about it. You know that you're supposed to love and forgive people. Christians don't do things like this. We have to be very careful not to upset or offend anyone."

And so what do we do? We expend enormous energy and time trying not to offend anyone. We dance around problems and cater to the needs of the one who whines the most. We say things like, "Oh, we need to be careful. We wouldn't want to upset Mr. and Mrs. So and So.

Maybe, just maybe Mr. and Mrs. So and So need to be upset. Maybe someone needs the courage to say that this kind of behavior is just not acceptable. It's been my observation that resentment builds up over time. And just like Mt Vesuvius, when things build up inside there will surely come a time when there will be an eruption!

You know what really happens when you pour oil on troubled waters? One day someone lights a match! And then everyone wonders what in the world happened.

Have you ever noticed how conflicts are often all out of proportion to the things that people complain about? Do you know why that's true? It's because people pour oil on troubled water. They push down their feelings and do not know how to express their frustration with broken relationships.

You think that everything is fine and then "boom." Somebody lights a match.

TELL SOMEONE ELSE

And there's a second common (and equally ineffective) way of dealing with broken relationships. Instead of going to the person with whom we have an issue and discussing it in private, we go to some else.

We have a problem with Jane, but we're afraid to tell Jane so we tell Mary. And we tell Mary, "Now don't tell anyone this, but Jane ... I'm glad you let me get this off my chest. Now remember, don't tell anyone a word of this. I wouldn't want to hurt Jane's feelings."

And Mary doesn't tell anyone about Jane except for six of her best friends and they tell six of their best friends and finally the only one in the whole church who hasn't heard about this problem is Jane herself.

And that's when one of Jane's "friends" decides to tell her what "everyone" is saying about her.

I bet you can guess what happens next. Jane either withdraws by leaving the church or she forms her own support group to counterattack her persecutor. No matter what happens everyone loses.

THE PRIVATE MEETING

Notice the biblical model is absolutely the opposite of what we normally do. Instead of letting tensions build up inside or telling other people about the problem, the Bible takes a simple, direct approach. Go directly to the person with whom you have an issue and work it out. It's been my experience that 99 percent of the time when you do this the right way problem ends right there. It's not always easy, but it is effective.

But, I'm also compelled to say that there are some skills we need in order to make sure that we build bridges instead of doing what we fear ... namely making things worse. One of the first rules of scriptural interpretation is that Scripture should interpret Scripture. That is, we should look at any passage of Scripture in light of the theology of the whole Bible. And that's especially true when it comes to our lesson for today.

When I read today's lesson it seems very black and white. One person is wrong and one person is right. One person has sinned and another person has been sinned against. Now sometimes that happens, but it is more common to have sin on both sides of the relationship.

I think that whenever we attempt to build a bridge in a broken relationship we should do so with a large measure of humility. As a pastor I have gone through this process of personal reconciliation quite a few times. This is one of my major jobs, to make sure that misunderstanding and broken relationships do not interfere with the mission of the church. So, I have had occasion more than most to meet with someone in private and talk about things I would rather not talk about.

And I cannot think of one instance where part of the fault in that broken relationship did not rest squarely on my own shoulders as well as on the person with whom I was talking.

The Apostle Paul once said that we have all sinned and fall short of God's glory. When we are in the business of peacemaking and bridge building we discover in a very personal way the profound truth of that statement. We fall short ... not only in our relationship with God but also in our relationship with other people.

When we studied this passage at Bible study someone said that he didn't feel comfortable confronting a person about their behavior. And you know I don't feel comfortable confronting someone about their behavior either. Maybe it's because confrontation is the wrong word to describe what we are doing.

The Bible tells us that we should speak the truth in love. (Ephesians 4:15)

And I would suggest that this is a lot easier to do when we recognize that in any broken

relationship there is usually sin on both sides of the equation. If I recognize my own sinfulness in the sin of another I will approach them in a much different way than if I am convinced that the fault is always on the other side only.

Don't misunderstand. This does not mean that we should somehow minimize the sinful nature of broken relationships. To the contrary the Bible tells us consistently to carry out this whole process in a straightforward and open way. The way to deal with sin is not to minimize but to shine a spotlight on it.

WITNESSES

Have you ever heard of the sunshine laws? Sunshine laws say that public officials can't have secret meetings to decide what they are going to do before the public meeting. (By the way I think these laws are broken more than any other much to the detriment of public policy.) But, in God's kingdom sunshine should always be the rule. Shedding light on a problem is always the answer.

If two people can't work out their differences in private then you get two or three other people involved in the process. Again, I think that unless you look at the teachings of Scripture as a whole this is another one of those verses that could be used in the wrong way.

The Scripture tells us that if you have a problem with someone and can't work it out in private then you need to take two or three other people with you to serve as witnesses ... as in a court of law. This passage has been used as precedent for establishing church courts and making decisions about people based upon the testimony of "witnesses."

In the most extreme cases this may be necessary. But, again I think that by and large this has proved to be a mistake.

The purpose of getting other people involved is not to build a "case" against the so-called offender. It is a way of acknowledging that if I have a problem with a person in the church; it's not just a problem between the two of us. It's a problem for the whole church. We are the body of Christ, as Paul put it and each one of us is a part of it. So if one part of the body suffers, we all suffer.

Our society is big on the rights of the individual. If we have a problem with somebody, then that's our business. Nobody else need get involved.

But, when we become a member of the church those old rules don't apply. Instead of being individuals who "mind our own business" we are part of God's provisional kingdom on earth, and we are given a whole new rulebook. We are called to witness to one another about the forgiveness that is ours in Christ Jesus. This is not just some general theological principle, but a very concrete action. It is a grass roots way of doing peacemaking.

COMMITTEE ON MINISTRY

Some of you know that one of the jobs I have had as a member of Presbytery (the association of Presbyterian Churches in our area) is to serve on the Committee on Ministry.

The Committee on Ministry sometimes serves this function of being a "witness" when people in our churches can't get along.

When I first was called to serve on this committee, I dreaded being asked to go into situations where there was conflict. What if I said the wrong thing? What if I made things worse? What do you say to people who are so conflicted that they are calling in outside help?

It had been my experience that when people reach the point that they call in outside help it is often too late for the relationship. That applies to churches as well as people. But, over the years I began to understand and be more comfortable with my role in these situations. It was my job to be a witness.

I wasn't called to be judge and say who was right and who was wrong. I was called to be a witness to the truth.

First of all I was called to be a witness to the gospel, the message that all have sinned and are without hope save for the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. And second I was called to be a witness to the truth. That is, I was called to shed light on those areas of the congregation's life that had prior to this time been private and hidden.

Don't misunderstand. There are certainly many things that must be held in confidence. But, when it comes to a struggle that is affecting the life of the church, quite often the best thing is to just tell the truth. The witness enables everyone to tell their version of the truth openly and honestly. If there is disagreement on the facts the witness can say, "We agree on these points, and we disagree of those points."

TELL THE CHURCH

And, if as happens in very rare cases, there can be no meeting of the minds on some important points, then the disagreement is told openly and honestly to the whole church. Jesus said tell it to the church. The deeper the disagreement the more we need sunshine.

Now, you would think that this is a formula for creating a church split. We fear this so we want to be secretive if there is any problem.

But, let's be honest. If there's a problem, it's never secret. It's just spread by gossip.

Some people don't know anything about what is going on, but they do know that everyone at the church seems very anxious. So, these people become anxious themselves and either add to the problem or leave the church. Others know part of the problem, but they know it from only one perspective. So they become part of a faction promoting one side or the other.

The end result is that the church, instead of being the body of Christ becomes a source of contention and discouragement. And the solution is to do the very thing that many fear. Tell everybody everything openly.

When Jesus had a problem with the religious leaders or his own disciples he was very open

and even public in his criticism. But, the point was never to judge. The point was to save. The point was to reconnect people whose relationship with God and with their fellow men and women had been broken. The point was to find that lost sheep and bring him or her back to the fold.

TRUTH

Jesus once said something that is often quoted. He said if we are his disciples we will know the truth and the truth will set us free. We often think that this means the truth of right doctrine. But, I think this passage suggests that it is more than that. The truth is that very personal truth about how our relationship with God is connected intimately to our relationship with others.

There is no connection to God that does not involve a connection to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Verses 19 and 20 of today's passage are often ripped from their context and viewed in a distorted way. Those verses say that if two or three believers are gathered together and pray for something they'll get it.

It seems to me that the context of this passage suggests that what we get is not everything we want in a material sense. What we get is forgiveness and reconciliation, and we get the promise that God is with us. God works through this process.

In fact the Apostle Paul said that this is what the gospel is all about. It is the ministry of reconciliation. Because God has been gracious to us we are to be gracious to others. (2 Corinthians 5:18)

That truth enables us to go boldly into anxious situations. God goes with us and helps us work out the kingdom in unexpected ways.

We should know that this is how it works. At the heart of the Christian faith is conflict. There is body broken and blood shed. There is a cross. But over and over again in many ways and in many situations we see that there is indeed forgiveness and salvation and new life for those who dare to follow Christ.

Let us boldly proclaim that truth. Let us accept this wondrous ministry of reconciliation. Let us build a bridge to somewhere ... that place called heaven. Amen.

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