

Matthew 18: 15 - 20

WE WORSHIP YOU, O GOD, AND YOU THANK YOU THAT YOU RECEIVE US WHEN WE TURN TO YOU. WE TURN TO YOU NOW, TRUSTING THE PROMISE OF JESUS CHRIST TO BE WITH US WHENEVER TWO OR THREE GATHER IN HIS NAME. COME TO US, AND FILL US WITH YOUR SPIRIT OF UNITY AND TRUTH, IN JESUS' NAME. AMEN.

SOMEONE ONCE SAID: "COMMUNITY WOULD BE GREAT, IT IF WEREN'T FOR ALL THE PEOPLE." IT'S THE BEST KIND OF JOKE BECAUSE THERE IS ABSOLUTE TRUTH TO IT. GOD IS CERTAINLY AMONG TWO OR THREE PEOPLE WHO GATHER IN GOD'S NAME, BUT SO IS CONFLICT. THROUGHOUT THE 18TH CHAPTER OF MATTHEW, AND IN THESE 6 VERSES IN PARTICULAR, JESUS UNDERSCORES THE IMPORTANCE OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY. SPEAKING TO HIS DISCIPLES, HE LETS THEM KNOW THAT THEIR FAITH IS NOT A PRIVATE MATTER, SOMETHING THEY CAN GO OFF BY THEMSELVES AND ENJOY ALL ALONE UNDER A TREE. THEIR LIFE IN CHRIST IS A COMMUNITY AFFAIR, SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS WHEN TWO OR THREE OF THEM ARE GATHERED TOGETHER IN HIS NAME. *THAT IS* WHEN HE PROMISES TO BE IN THEIR MIDST.

JESUS LETS THEM KNOW THAT THEY NEED EACH OTHER, NOT ONLY FOR PRACTICAL REASONS BUT FOR SPIRITUAL ONES AS WELL. THEY NEED EACH OTHER BECAUSE TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE; THEY NEED EACH OTHER BECAUSE THEY CAN ACCOMPLISH MORE TOGETHER THAN THEY CAN APART. JESUS REMINDED THEM THAT THEY BELONG TO A FAMILY. JESUS LETS HIS DISCIPLES KNOW THAT IN THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD, WHEN YOUR BROTHER SINS AGAINST YOU, YOU MUST GO AND TALK TO HIM, AND IF THAT DOES NOT WORK YOU MUST KEEP GOING BACK---TAKING OTHER PEOPLE WITH YOU NEXT TIME—DOING EVERYTHING IN YOUR POWER TO GET YOUR BROTHER BACK AGAIN.

THERE ARE 2 CURIOUS THINGS ABOUT JESUS' ADVICE. FIRST, HE PUTS THE BURDEN ON THE VICTIM, ON THE PERSON WHO HAS BEEN SINNED *AGAINST*. SECOND, HE SEEMS MUCH LESS INTERESTED IN WHO IS RIGHT AND WHO IS WRONG THAN HE IS GETTING THE FAMILY BACK TOGETHER AGAIN. THE IMPORTANT THING IS THAT WE LISTEN TO EACH OTHER, HE SAYS, BUT IF A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY REFUSES TO LISTEN OVER AND OVER AGAIN—IF THE DOOR

TO COMMUNICATION STAY FIRMLY SHUT---THEN WE ARE NOT TO PRETEND THAT NOTHING HAS HAPPENED. WE ARE TO RECOGNIZE THAT ONE OF OUR MEMBERS HAS LEFT THE FAMILY, BECAUSE THE ONLY THING WORSE THAN LOSING A BROTHER OR SISTER IS PRETENDING THAT YOU HAVE NOT AND LETTING THAT PERSON FESTER IN YOUR MIDST LIKE AN OPEN WOUND.

THIS IS VERY HARD ADVICE...EVEN HARDER TO ACT UPON. CAN YOU IMAGINE DOING EXACTLY AS JESUS SUGGESTS? EPISCOPAL PRIEST AND AUTHER, BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR WRITES THIS SINARIO: "LET'S SAY YOU BELONG TO A NEIGHBORHOOD CHURCH OF ABOUT 250 MEMBERS. WEEK AFTER WEEK YOU SIT IN A PEW NEXT TO JOE, WHOM YOU GET TO KNOW RATHER WELL, SO WELL THAT ONE DAY IN EARLY SEPTEMBER HE ASKS IF HE CAN BORROW YOUR LAWN MOWER.

SURE, YOU SAY, FULL OF GOOD CHRISTIAN CHEER, AND JOE ASSURES YOU THAT HE WILL BRING IT BACK WITHIN THE WEEK. BUT THE WEEK PASSES, AND THEN ANOTHER WEEK, UNTIL FINALLY YOU CALL JOE AND ASK HIM IF YOU CAN HAVE YOUR LAWN MOWER BACK, WHICH IS WHEN HE TELLS YOU THAT HE HAS LOANED IT TO SOMEONE ELSE WHO HAS BACKED OVER IT IN HIS TRUCK AND THAT THE LAWN MOWER IS NO MORE. JOE CONSIDERS THIS A PIECE OF BAD LUCK THAT THE TWO OF YOU SHARE, BUT YOU CONSIDER THAT YOU HAVE BEEN WRONGED.

SO THE FIRST THING YOU DO IS TO GO OVER TO JOE'S BY YOURSELF AND TALK IT OVER WITH HIM, OFFERING TO TAKE HALF OF WHAT THE LAWN MOWER WAS WORTH FOR THE SAKE OF THE FRIENDSHIP, BUT JOE IS OFFENDED. CAN HE HELP IT IF THE GUY RAN OVER THE LAWN MOWER WITH HIS TRUCK? HE SAYS THESE THINGS HAPPEN, AND HE IS SORRY IT HAPPENED TO YOU, BUT THAT DOES NOT MAKE IT HIS FAULT. SO YOU GO HOME, OPEN THE CHURCH DIRECTORY AT RANDOM, AND CALL THE FIRST TWO NAMES YOU SEE, ASKING THEM TO GO BACK TO JOE'S WITH YOU AND HELP YOU WORK THINGS OUT WITH HIM.

NEXT DAY AFTER WORK THE THREE OF YOU KNOCK ON JOE'S DOOR. HE IS SURPRISED TO SEE YOU AND GETS MAD WHEN YOU TELL HIM WHY YOU ARE THERE. WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO DO, GANG UP ON HIM? DRAG HIS NAME THROUGH THE MUD? STANDING THERE ON THE PORCH, YOU START TO TELL HIM THAT YOU HAVE RECONSIDERED, THAT YOU ARE WILLING

TO REPORT THE LOSS OF THE LAWN MOWER TO YOUR INSURANCE COMPANY IF JOE WILL JUST TELL YOU WHAT HAPPENED, BUT BEFORE YOU CAN FINISH YOUR SPEECH JOES TELLS YOU TO GET OFF HIS PROPERTY BEFORE HE CALLS THE POLICE, AND THEN SHUTS THE DOOR IN YOUR FACE.

WHAT DO YOU DO NEXT? YOU GUESSED IT: YOU CALL EVERYONE IN THE CHURCH AND ASK THEM TO MEET YOU AT JOE'S HOUSE NEXT SATURDAY MORNING. SINCE YOU DOUBT HE WILL ANSWER THE DOOR, YOU MAKE SIGNS HE CAN READ THROUGH HIS WINDOWS, SIGNS THAT SAY, "FORGET THE LAWN MOWER, JOE" AND "WE ARE YOUR FRIENDS" OR "COME OUT AND TALK." ON SATURDAY EVERYONE IS THERE, MILLING AROUND ON JOE'S FRONT LAWN, CARRYING THEIR SIGNS AND WATCHING THE HOUSE, WHICH IS AS DARK AS A TOMB. NOTHING HAPPENS FOR 20 MINUTES OR SO, BUT THEN YOU SEE ONE SLAT OF THE VENETIAN BLINDS PULLED BACK, AND WHILE YOU CANNOT SEE JOE YOU KNOW THAT HE CAN SEE YOU, SO YOU WAVE AND SMILE AND BECKON TO HIM TO COME OUT. THEN THE SLAT POPS BACK IN TO PLACE AND NOTHING HAPPENS FOR ANOTHER 20 MINUTES, UNTIL YOU LOOK UP AND SEE JOE STANDING SHEEPISHLY ON HIS FRONT PORCH, A CHECK FOR THE LAWN MOWER IN HIS HAND. THE CROWD CHEERS, YOU AND JOE EMBRACE, AND EVERYONE LIVES HAPPILY EVER AFTER. THE END."

I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE THINKING RIGHT NOW. THERE'S NO WAY. BUT HOW WOULD WE KNOW? I HAVE NEVER TIRED ANYTHING LIKE THAT, HAVE YOU? WHEN SOMEONE CROSSES ME, MY STRATEGIES ARE USUALLY QUITE DIFFERENT, AND MY GUESS IS YOURS ARE TOO. THE FIRST ONE, THE ONE THAT COMES MOST NATURALLY, IS TO PRETEND NOTHING HAS HAPPENED. FORGET THE LAWN MOWER. JUST LET IT GO. NO NEED TO GET UPSET. MAYBE HE WILL BRING IT BACK SOMEDAY; MAYBE YOU WILL NEVER HAVE TO ASK. MEANWHILE, IT IS AWKWARD TO BE AROUND HIM, BUT THERE THAT IS BETTER THAN A FIGHT. IGNORE IT AND IT WILL GO AWAY.

SECOND STRATEGY IS THE COLD SHOULDER. YOU NEVER TELL THE OTHER PERSON WHAT IS WRONG BECAUSE THAT WOULD BE IMPOLITE, SO YOU JUST IGNORE THEM. IT NEVER OCCURS TO YOU TO ASK THEM ABOUT WHAT REALLY HAPPENED BETWEEN THE TWO OF YOU

BECAUSE YOU ARE SURE YOU ALREADY KNOW. THEY WERE IN THE WRONG; LET THEM FIGURE IT OUT.

YET THE THIRD STRATEGY IS REVENGE...THE SILENT, DEADLY KIND..WHERE YOU NEVER ADMIT ANY ILL WILL TOWARD SOMEONE BUT YOU LET IT LEAK OUT ALL OVER THE PLACE WITH YOUR NEGATIVITY.

WE CHOOSE DISTANCE INSTEAD OF CONFRONTATION. THE DICTIONARY DEFINES CONFRONTATION AS: TO BRING TWO PEOPLE FACE TO FACE, FRONT TO FRONT, TO SORT OUT WHAT IS GOING ON BETWEEN THEM. THAT IS WHAT TODAY'S GOSPEL READING RECOMMENDS, AND IT IS ALSO WHAT MOST OF US WOULD DO JUST ABOUT ANYTHING TO AVOID. THE EXCUSES RUSH TO OUR MINDS: "WHO AM I TO JUDGE? WHAT IS IT TO ME? I GO TO *HER*? SHE'S THE ONE WHO HURT ME; LET HER COME TO ME. TELL HIM MY FEELINGS ARE HURT? WHAT IF HE JUST HURTS THEM AGAIN? I WOULDN'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY. I WOULD FEEL LIKE A FOOL. AND WHY BOTHER ANYWAY? THINGS WILL NEVER CHANGE.

THOSE ARE ALL FINE EXCUSES, BUT FOR THOSE OF US WHO ARE CALLED TO CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, THEY SIMPLY WON'T DO. FOR US, THERE IS SOMETHING MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING RIGHT OR WRONG, AND THAT SOMETHING IS KEEPING THE FAMILY TOGETHER. THE REAL PROBLEM IS HOW EAGER WE ARE TO REPAY SIN WITH MORE SIN.

THERE IS ANOTHER WAY, AN ALTERNATIVE TO PUTTING DISTANCE BETWEEN OURSELVES AND THOSE WITH WHOM WE ARE IN CONFLICT. WE CAN GO TO THEM, JESUS SAY, AND TELL THEM WHAT IS WRONG, OR WHAT WE THINK IS WRONG, BECAUSE THE BEST WAY TO END A FIGHT IS ADMIT THAT WE TOO MIGHT WE WRONG.

JESUS TELLS US PLAINLY THAT THE WAY WE CONDUCT RELATIONSHIPS HERE AND NOW HAS DIRECT CONSEQUENCES FOR GOD'S COMING KINGDOM. THE DEPTH, HEALTH, AND QUALITY OF OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE CHURCH REALLY MATTER. THEY MATTER ETERNALLY.

"IF THE OFFENDER REFUSES TO LISTEN EVEN TO THE CHURCH, LET SUCH A ONE BE TO YOU AS A GENTILE AND A TAX COLLECTOR." AT FIRST GLANCE, THIS INSTRUCTION MIGHT SOUND LIKE IT GIVES US PERMISSION TO SHUN PEOPLE WITH WHOM WE EXPERIENCE DEEP

CONFLICT. BUT CONSIDER HOW JESUS *TREATS* GENTILES AND TAX COLLECTORS. IN EVERY INSTANCE, JESUS OFFERS THE OUTSIDER LOVE, CARE, HEALING, HOPE AND COMPASSION. HE CONTINUES TO LOVE THEM AS CREATIVELY AND AUTHENTICALLY AS HE CAN.

JESUS TEACHES US WE ARE CALLED TO BE THE FIRST TO REACH OUT, EVEN WHEN WE ARE THE ONES WHO HAVE BEEN HURT, EVEN WHEN GOD KNOWS WE HAVE DONE NOTHING WRONG, EVEN WHEN EVERYTHING WITHIN US WANTS TO SULK OR FIGHT BACK...STILL WE ARE CALLED TO COMMUNITY WITH ONE ANOTHER, TO ACT LIKE THE BODY OF CHRIST WE ARE. THAT IS HOW WE KNOW GOD AND HOW GOD KNOWS US. THAT IS WHAT WE ARE CALLED TO DO: TO CONFRONT AND MAKE UP, TO FORGIVE AND SEEK FORGIVENESS, TO HEAL AND BE HEALED....

WHAT WOULD IT BE LIKE FOR ALL THE WORLD TO KNOW THAT WE ARE CHRISTIANS—NOT BY OUR RIGHTNESS, BUT BY OUR LOVE. WE HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE AND EVERYTHING TO GAIN IN THE NAME OF JESUS. AMEN.