

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

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Text: Matthew 18:15-20

Title: I get it, but it's still hard!

Focus: Jesus offers practical wisdom about living together in community when tension or conflict strains relationships or trust is broken. We can recognize his teaching as wise, but it's still hard to follow.

Gospel Reading Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵"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. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, 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. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Opening Engager—Practical Wisdom

Have you ever followed a practice or a wisdom saying from scripture and wondered how that wisdom fit or was in sync with current recommended practice or modern research on a particular topic?

Last week in the sermon, I focused on a phrase from Paul's letter to the church in Rome, "**Let love be genuine**" as an extension of his opening encouragement to "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice." I then told stories of how I saw some church pastors and other leaders living that out in such a way that demonstrated how they discovered joy or a renewed sense of purpose. I was trying to show the practical wisdom of what Paul was saying.

The same kind of example of the wisdom of scripture being borne out in practical ways happened last week when our men's group gathered for a potluck dinner and Bible study. Dale led a Bible study focusing on praise and expressing gratitude. One of the things we talked about was our experience of feeling refreshed or renewed through expressing gratitude.

Erik Schoen followed up our study with an email about current research on mental health practices that underscores the wisdom of regular habits of expressing gratitude. In his note¹ he said

¹ Email Erik sent Sept. 1.

Dale reminded us about the importance of taking time to appreciate God on a daily basis. This — and seeking out “awe-inspiring” experiences — ties in with research into mental wellness that indicates the practice of gratitude to be a foundational practice. The following checklist came through our EAP provider:

The Gratitude Habit

Regularly practicing gratitude through routinely recognizing positive things in one’s life has been linked with improved mental health, relationships, and optimism. The following are some ways to incorporate gratitude into your daily life. (They offered 4 ways to implement practices of gratitude.)

- **Start a gratitude journal.**
- **Create a gratitude board**
- **Fill a gratitude jar with things you’re grateful for.**
- **Carve out a time to practice gratitude.**

I’m asking these questions today about practical benefits of the wisdom of scripture because I think today’s reading from Matthew similarly offers practical wisdom about human relationships and communication. Jesus is providing practical wisdom about being direct in the way we talk with each other. His instructions are a warning about the negative impact when we avoid being direct with a person when we experience tension or conflict.

A Pastor New to a Congregation Provides an Example—even when there is no conflict present

Jesus is talking with the disciples (and us!) about what to do when we are in a trusting relationship and someone wrongs you.

- He poses the scenario: ‘If another member of the church sins against you. . .’

That phrase, “sins against you” suggests a significant tension or conflict which affects or disrupts this relationship of trust. Most of us have difficulty or are at least uncomfortable with addressing conflict directly, but what’s interesting is that I think we oftentimes have difficulty speaking directly to people even when ***no conflict is present***.

You know that saying you’ve heard from childhood? “If you don’t have anything nice to say. . .”

Yes, “don’t say anything at all.”

There is some wisdom in that, too. But there is also a way that we tweak that or take it too far. When I say “We,” I think it’s a common habit for “good church people.” We’re too prone to want to be “nice” to one another, that sometimes we’re not honest enough to simply express our wishes or intent even in a positive way, much less directly admit to ourselves when something is really irritating us and then address that with the person with whom we have tension.

Here's an example of how we can be so ingrained in our habits of "being nice" that we even avoid speaking up even when it's not really a situation with conflict or harm has been done.

From [an interim] Pastor New to a Congregation

Here's a reflection from a pastor new to a particular congregation:²

"One of the great "joys" of starting in a new congregation: trying to figure out if someone actually wants you to visit them or not. Is "I don't want to be any trouble" or "I am hoping to get back to church soon" a polite way of telling you they don't actually need/want you to visit, or do they expect a back and forth where you convince them it's not a problem and they'll be deeply insulted if you don't come. There seems to always be an understood script around these things but it's different in every congregation. Sometimes I really wish people would just say what they mean.

In reply, some other pastors commented about how they had experienced the same: (Their comments indicate this is not a unique occurrence.)

- So much yes!!! I would add to this the code language concerning sickness and death. What does "not doing well" actually mean when you tell me about someone?
- I wish everyone would say what they mean.
- People are elusive, including interim(s) [pastors]. We humans tend to hide things we are embarrassed about, afraid of, or confused about. It's hard for many to just say what we mean.

What's striking to me here in this observation from a pastor about interpersonal dynamics and communication is that these tendencies to avoid direct conversation come into play *even before* a situation is troubled by conflict. This pastor is new to the congregation—there's no present conflict. But the indirect communication or vagueness impacts congregational relationships and pastoral effectiveness. I'm pointing that out because this situation represents a challenge even before conflict comes into play. If you add in conflict, the barriers and difficulty increase.

So, What Does Jesus Say?

Let's get to what Jesus says. Repeating what we've already said, the situation is when someone you trust has wronged you—or at least that's your perception. What do you do? Jesus describes three steps:

Step 1: Talk with the person directly.

I think there is some reflection or fine tuning that's helpful as we take this guidance to heart. For instance, what's the difference between something small that may bug you versus a source of conflict that won't go away and needs to be addressed?

²² Shared in a Facebook post on a pastors/church leaders page.

I think there are times when we all need to “vent” by letting go of some irritation or stress in a safe place where no one is harmed. Jesus does describe a situation in which someone has “sinned against us,” so he’s trying to identify something more significant than a minor irritation.

But, practically speaking, if an issue continues to gnaw at us, we need to address it directly with the other person rather than ignore it.

“Address it directly with the other person” means:

- Not involving a third party by telling them the thing that the other person has done which harms you and either implicitly or explicitly expecting them to do something about it—like *they* should go tell the other person. Go to the one who has harmed you.
- Also, be cautious when others try to hook you in the same way: Recognize when someone is trying to hook you in. You may need to say,
 - “What happened when you went to talk with this person?” or
 - “What do you think would happen when you talk with this person?”
- Getting hooked in this way is called “Triangulation.”
- Talking directly, especially when there is tension or conflict or harm, means face-to-face conversation is best. Email and text (not tools available to Jesus, of course!) are great for many purposes, but are not the best for picking up non-verbal cues, give-and-take, active listening, checking for understanding, clarifying, and problem-solving.

With that guidance about having a face-to-face conversation, maybe this is a good time to acknowledge that this is hard. It’s hard to directly address being wronged. It’s hard to have the courage to express disappointment or pain. It’s hard, also, to extend a hand that may lead to understanding and forgiveness. Sometimes, to our detriment, we may find it easier to avoid the whole thing, remain bitter or angry, and carry blame.

It’s one thing to read this wisdom from Jesus, nod your head and agree with the wisdom—that feels manageable and maybe even easy; it makes sense. It is a whole additional challenge to *do* it. If you are the person who is troubled and you realize that you have to address the matter and confront the other person in some way, that is *hard*! It’s hard to address conflict or to wonder how the other person will respond or what they’ll think or say about you or how this will affect your relationship.

Jesus says when you have been wronged and you go and directly speak with that person and that “member listens to you, you have regained that one.”

“Regained:” That word signals that the aim is reconnection or restoration or reconciliation. The aim isn’t confrontation for its own sake or to exercise power or to provoke shame or embarrassment. It’s not punishment. An initial goal could be *clarity*—be clear about what you want, listen to what they want, and identify a common goal. The ultimate aim is reconciliation.

Step 2: And Jesus says if that initial effort toward regaining trust and restoring the relationship is not met—if you are not listened to, if the other person ignores you or “blows you off,” to put it in everyday terms, then take another person whom you both trust—Jesus indicates that would be another member of the community—then you would have another way of seeking reconciliation.

Step 3:

¹⁷If 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.

- “Treat them like a Gentile or a tax collector.”

That instruction might sound like, “You can cast them aside or shun them like you would an outsider,” but remember how Jesus responded to Gentiles and tax collectors:

Earlier in Matthew, Jesus had an exchange with Pharisees who were irritated with him for hanging out the wrong kind of folks. Here’s how that went:

¹⁰And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹²But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. (Matthew 9:10-12).

- Jesus was always reaching out to the outsider.

In this interaction with the Pharisees earlier in Matthew, Jesus demonstrates how he responded to “tax collectors and sinners,” an example which suggests that we should continue to have concern for those he calls Gentiles and tax collectors in this passage.

A Few Other Points

This approach is not a fix-all approach to conflict. It doesn’t fix everything (nor does it claim to do so.) Just last week in a reading from Romans chapter 12 was the phrase, **“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18).**

You may speak directly and show a willingness to listen, and be seeking reconciliation, but it depends on more than you. Sometimes restoration or reconciliation is not possible. You have your part in the relationship and there are factors beyond your control.

- Church people have just as much difficulty with these interpersonal communication challenges as anyone.

More Practical Wisdom: “I Get it, but it’s Hard!”

We can recognize the wisdom, but it’s hard to carry it out.

I opened the sermon with the comment that Jesus offers some really practical wisdom here. This story is found only in the gospel of Matthew, which suggests that of all the stories, encounters, lessons, and other content the gospel writers *could* share

with their community from all the events they knew about Jesus, Matthew alone chose to include this. He may have found it particular relevant for his community because they could have been struggling with this situation.

But reading this and nodding your head is one thing when we see the wisdom, but it's still hard to put into practice. It's hard when people who care about each other harm each other. And yet it happens—it happens in work and school settings. It happens at home and at church. It's hard to take this direct approach.

One time I was visiting a church member, and serving her communion, and this was the designated reading from the previous Sunday.

I finished reading and she said, “Well, that was timely.”

She explained that as I read, there was a relationship that immediately popped into her mind. There was a relationship that needed her attention. Something was bugging her and she knew that she had to say something about it to this friend.

She even told me that this was a relationship that she had prayed about, wondering what she should do. She was praying for guidance.

- Was hearing this scripture that way for you?
- Was there a person that came to mind?
- A circumstance that you've ignored, hoping that it would resolve itself, but now you know it will not go away on its own?

May we take just a moment to think of such a person or relationship in our life. . . Speaking directly, being ready to listen, seeking reconciliation. . . All of that is hard. As we think of this person, this relationship: “Lord, give us courage. Help us to see our situation clearly, speak clearly, and seek reconciliation. Peace be with the one from whom we are estranged.” Amen.