

Good Relationships Matter
Matthew 18:15-20
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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One of the mantras you've heard me repeat adfinitum over the years is "Christianity is primarily about the quality of our relationships." Contrary to popular misconceptions Christianity isn't all about the do's and don'ts according to the Ten Commandments or any other rule cooked up by religious authorities over the centuries. Instead, Jesus taught the primary commandment is to love God as well as love yourself and your neighbor.

If you doubt me, take a closer look at the Commandments. The first four, which include worshipping God alone and keeping the Sabbath, are all about taking care of your relationship with God. The next six, including not murdering, stealing, lying and coveting are all about taking care of your relationships with your neighbor and your self. As I always tell the couples I marry, a hundred years from now no one will care about how much money you earned or how much your house or car cost, the only thing that will matter is the quality of your relationships. That alone will be your lasting legacy to your family and community.

It is only in this context, taking good care of your relationships, this morning's teaching can be rightly heard, otherwise, taken out of context and abused, it can cause more trouble and pain than the good it's supposed to bring.

"If another member of the church has sinned against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are along...if you are not listened to, go back, take one or two along with you...if the member still refuses to listen, 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 or a tax collector." (Matthew 18:15-18)

There's wisdom in this teaching if it's carried out in the right spirit, but if done self-righteously, it's a sure formula for disaster.

A few weeks back I pointed out the difference between being an assertive Christian and a toxic, aggressive bully. Jesus is the best role model for healthy assertive living, always straight forward and firm, always speaking the truth in love. Even when confronted by his adversaries Jesus never lost self-control. Why not? His intimate relationship with his Father guaranteed he'd always be within God's will. By placing himself under God's authority, constantly praying, "Father, what ever happens, keep me in your hands," Jesus was empowered to consistently speak and act from a position of strength.

Now contrast Jesus' assertive style with the aggressive tactics of the scribes and Pharisees. They reacted to Jesus from both fear and anger, always a position of weakness. They lied, manipulated and plotted by breaking every commandment and rupturing every relationship with God, their neighbors and themselves. But even after they gave their worst, Jesus remained assertive and gave back his best saying, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

Obviously, ideally, we'll always try to follow Jesus' example, but just as obviously and realistically we are prone to being more like Jesus' adversaries, instinctively becoming aggressive whenever things get too hot to handle.

Psychology teaches there are two distinctive reactions people have to confrontations: either fight or flight. When someone, as Jesus put it, “sins against you” we either instinctively lash out or we run away. Fighting would include active aggression: shouting, name calling and accusations. Flight would include passive aggression: removing yourself from the situation, or simply becoming quiet, shutting down and emotionally isolating yourself from the fracas.

Jesus shows us there’s an alternative to fight or flight: remembering you are a child of God, everyone is your neighbor and you are your brother’s keepers. We are responsible for our relationships and if we take care of them as we should, especially in our church family, then “when another member of the church sins against you” you are prepared to either approach or be approached and work together for reconciliation. In other words we can be assertive in our dealings with each other as long as we do the hard work of keeping and nurturing Christian friendship.

What do I mean by hard work? To begin with, learning how to forgive. Immediately after Jesus gave this teaching Peter asked, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?” Jesus answered, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Jesus makes it clear: we are obligated to forgive as many times as God has forgiven us, and what’s implied is we are equally responsible to accept forgiveness from the one we’ve wronged. In any case, “fight or flight” is no option in the Kingdom of God, only forgiving and being forgiven.

Unfortunately, not everybody will submit to this new teaching. Jesus realized there would be times when someone will refuse to be reconciled. When those who will not forgive or be forgiven and instead choose to divorce themselves from being in relationship your only recourse is to, in Jesus’ own words, “let such a one be to you as a Gentile or tax collector.” Another way of putting it, if you have done everything possible, but the other refuses to cooperate, then let him go and hope and pray the time will come when the friendship will be restored.

I’m sure Jesus struggled with this last pronouncement but he was being realistic, not only because it’s hard to see a relationship die, but also to protect us from the rejection of the one who refuses to let go of the bitterness and anger that can consume any of us. It’s only when you honestly tried to do everything possible, and the other refuses to gracefully respond, the Jesus concedes, you have to let go, and hope and pray someday there will be a reconciliation.

Today we celebrate our relationships with God, our neighbors and ourselves as we come together around our Lord’s Table. Here we remember Jesus, who makes friendship with God and each other possible. Our celebration will continue after worship down in the Fellowship Hall over breakfast. And remember, Jesus is as present downstairs as he is in the Upper Room. We are the Church only because Jesus invites us into that perfectly balanced relationship we call the trinity, that eternal, mysterious love affair between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That sacred love empowers us to love God, ourselves and our neighbor within the beloved community and beyond.

We are all invited, so let’s come to the Table and be fed with the love of God that passes all knowledge.