

Honesty in Community
Matthew 18:15-20
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
September 6, 2020
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Bill sits in worship with his family, as he does every week. He sings the songs with passion. He listens carefully to the sermon. He is deeply touched by the prayers. The service must be just about over, he thinks, as his children begin to squirm. Then, rather than moving into the closing song, the pastor steps back to the microphone. "Friends, there is something we must address today in this community. There is a sinner among us. There is someone whose behavior is casting a shadow of doubt and unfaithfulness upon our community." Bill's heart races, as does the heart of every other person in that sanctuary, as he wonders who knows what he has been doing and what is going to happen when they find out.

You can imagine the rest of the story.

I will say that I have never witnessed anything like that, though I have been told that there are congregations for whom that experience would not be unusual. And when I hear that, I can't help but think of this passage.

I think of this passage, not because I understand that to be a faithful representation of what is being advised here, but because if we aren't careful that is exactly what a passage like today's can lead to.

And yet, a faithful reading would seem to take us in a very different direction.

After all, one of the mistakes we often make is to read passages of scripture or stories from scripture in isolation. And yet, they are meant to be read and understood as part of the whole. So it is important to ask questions about the original audience and what their experiences and understandings were. It is also important to look at what comes before and after our particular passage.

In the case of this reading from Matthew, a gospel written with a Jewish audience in mind, we hear Jesus in a series of teachings. In many of our Bibles these sections have titles about temptation and sin and forgiveness. It's easy when we read any of them separately to just focus on the topic at hand. But when we read them together we hear words about the building up of community. We hear, not so much a moralistic superiority attacking the personal sins of others, but a call to live in ways that nurture community and that, as we heard last week from Paul, work for the common good.

Today's particular reading comes right after Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep. You might remember that one where Jesus says that if a shepherd has 100 sheep and one is lost, they will leave the 99 to go and search for that one. Jesus then

concludes saying this is how God is, seeking us out and not stopping until we are brought back into the fold.

On the heels of this proclamation comes today's reading. And if we remember that, then suddenly it shifts the focus. It makes this reading that talks about how to address the sin of another in the community, not a set of rules with the goal of getting rid of the "bad seeds" but instead a series of steps meant to draw one who is separated from the community back in.

Too often Christians have read verse 17 which says, "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" – too often it is assumed that this means that the "offender" should be kicked out. However, if we remember who Jesus was - he was a person who was known to hang out with tax collectors and this is a gospel that ends with the instruction to go into all the world, which includes Gentiles.

So, when we consider that, we are reminded that it is only from the perspective of the religious rulers with whom Jesus was in conflict, that Gentiles and tax collectors were an enigma. To Jesus, they were people worth drawing in. After all, as New Testament professor Douglas R. A. Hare asks "does Matthew, by using these two terms, mean to remind his readers that the ostracized brother or sister is now the object of missionary activity?" ("Matthew", *Interpretation* series, John Knox Press, 1993, pg 214).

When we hear it that way, this passage really is about the building up of community. It is about finding a way to keep in the fold even those whose sins have hurt the community. It is about best practices for life together - a life of honesty and truth telling.

And we would all benefit from that.

How would our faith community and our broader communities look different if we learned how to have difficult conversations around sin and brokenness rather than just pretending hurts don't happen or holding grudges and letting anger fester?

How would our faith community and our broader communities look different if when a one-on-one conversation just wasn't working, we brought in a trusted third party...not to triangulate them, but so that we had a clear set of eyes and ears to help us find our way through together?

How would our faith community and our broader communities look different if when the hurt was so deep and private honesty wasn't working, we as a group cared enough about our wholeness and the healing of individuals, that we found our way through difficult conversations?

And how would our faith community and our broader communities look different if, when someone separated from us, we were still seeking ways to heal the brokenness and to entertain the possibilities of becoming one again?

There was a church that was broken. You wouldn't have known it from the outside. You wouldn't have sensed it the moment you walked in. But if you were around very long, you began to see that there was a lot of "us and them" going on there. You began to hear the quiet whispers, the hallway conversations. If you were observant, you would see leaders saying one thing in official conversations but stirring things up by saying exactly the opposite in smaller conversations in the parking lot.

This didn't happen one time or one year, but it became a pattern. And many members and many ministers suffered because of it.

But there came a time when a core group of people said, "Enough." And they called a pastor who believed that they meant it. And together they talked about honesty. Together they taught people that it was not only okay, but it was safe and encouraged to have direct conversations with people when there had been hurt or misunderstandings. Together, when the pot stirrers worked harder, they talked to the congregation about healthy practices and they went directly to the people in question and named what they were doing as unacceptable for the health of the congregation.

And, not immediately, but over the years the DNA of the congregation shifted. And instead of hostile attacks in the shadows, honest conversations - even when they were difficult - became the norm. And instead of people pitting others against each other, people began to talk to each other, to check signals, to listen to understand, and to learn to forgive. And the congregation became more whole.

As I said in the Children's Moment, over the course of this month we will be exploring what it means to share life in community. Our passage today reminds us that honesty is an important part of building faithful community. Creating an atmosphere where we can name our hurts, ideally to the one who hurt us...creating an atmosphere where the goal isn't division but is wholeness...creating an atmosphere where real forgiveness, rather than just a cheap passing statement of it, can be nurtured - all of these are the outcomes when honesty is at our core.

And this work is not easy. We all know that it often seems easier in the moment to just pretend that an offense didn't happen...we know that we spend way too much energy licking the wounds of past hurts because we can't find the courage to name them. But we also know that in the end we are better if we can be honest, even when honesty means difficult conversations about sin, and then do the ongoing work on our way toward healing.

And when we can do this, our communities will thrive. And Jesus reminds us that together we can do this. May it be so.