

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU ASK FOR

a sermon based on Matthew 18:15-20

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Today's passage offers a model for mediating disputes that arise in the church. This model comes out of the Jewish tradition. Matthew reports that Jesus said, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Here, the word "sin" was broadly defined as an act that causes injury to another, be it physical or spiritual injury. It's been said that sin is anything that separates us from God. Which is to say, if we are in right relationship with God, our lives will reflect God's will in thought, word and deed. Given that definition, there is a wide gulf between most of us and God. As the saying goes, "If God seems far away, guess who moved?"

The good news is that God is the One who provides the bridge by which we are able to overcome the great chasm of sin that separates us from God. And that bridge is Jesus. By his life and teachings, Jesus leads us back into right relationship with God. He calls us to be reconciled with God and he calls us to be reconciled with one another. Only, I'm not certain that Jesus actually recommended the process that is outlined in today's passage.

We don't like to talk about sin. We don't even use the word, except in mild jest. When I'm enjoying a particularly rich and wonderful desert, I will often say, "If you're looking for a definition of sin, this is it." Actually, given the number of calories and fat grams in one of those deserts, it probably would qualify as "sin." Be that as it may, we don't like to talk about sin because it's embarrassing. I should say, we don't like to talk about our own sins but we *do like* to talk about other's sins. The tabloids — you know — the magazines in the rack at the check-out stand in the supermarket that we pretend not to read but have memorized the headlines in a matter of seconds — sin is the tabloids' stock in trade.

According to the passage in Matthew, Jesus offered a formula by which we might either be reconciled with one another or end the relationship altogether. This formula says that when one offends me, I am to approach that person and ask that the offense be acknowledged. Hopefully, it is acknowledged and the relationship is restored and we are reconciled.

But, if not, then I need to bring two witnesses with me and confront the offender again. *Then*, hopefully the relationship is restored.

If I and two witnesses cannot convince the offender, then the whole church is supposed to be brought in and if that person refuses to listen even to the church, then let such a person “be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Those are pretty strong words. Gentiles and tax collectors...in the eyes of the Jewish community, you couldn’t get much lower than that.

This method of seeking reconciliation has some merit but it is potentially flawed, which is why I believe that Jesus did not recommend this entire procedure to his followers. From Paul’s letters, we know that the early church was rife with conflict and they had to find a means of achieving reconciliation or eliminating the disruptive elements.

It is possible that Jesus suggested the first two steps and the early church added the last one. There is an implicit warning in this process and that is, “Be careful what you ask for.”

The process put forth in Matthew is an either-or proposition. If the process results in the ejection of the offending person from the church, the accuser may get what he asked for but then the church will have failed.

Consider this: In another setting, Jesus told his followers that, if they had a grudge against another, before they go forward to the altar seeking God’s forgiveness, they should lay down their sacrificial offering and go to that person and be reconciled. And once reconciled, *then* go back to the altar and complete the ritual of confession and forgiveness. In other words, before asking God for forgiveness, Jesus says we are to forgive those who have offended us so that we will be ready to receive God’s forgiveness.

In Jesus’ mind, forgiveness and grace were paramount. “Love your enemy. Forgive those who do wrong to you. Forgive not once, not seven times [as Jewish law requires] but seventy *times* seven. If your enemy slaps you, then turn your face to the other side so that he may slap the other.” I have a story.

Two friends were walking through the desert.
During some point of the journey they had an argument
And one friend slapped the other one in the face.
The one who got slapped was hurt,
But without saying anything,
Wrote in the sand:
Today my best friend slapped me in the face.
They kept on walking, until they found an oasis,
Where they decided to take a bath.
The one who had been slapped got stuck in the mire
And started drowning, but the friend saved him.
After he recovered from the near drowning,
He wrote on a stone: today my best friend saved my life.
The friend who had both slapped and saved his best friend
Asked him, "after I hurt you, you wrote in the sand
And now, you write on a stone, why?"
The other friend replied "when someone hurts us
We should write it down in sand where winds of
Forgiveness can erase it away.
But, when someone does something good for us,
We must engrave it in stone
Where no wind can ever erase it."
Learn to write your hurts in the sand
And to carve your blessings in stone

You have perhaps seen or heard this definition of a true friend:
“A true friend is a person to whom you can pore out your heart, grain and chaff
together, into his/her patient hands and know that he/she will faithfully and gently
blow the chaff away. “
In our relationships, if we take Jesus’ teachings — **all** of his teachings — to heart,
then we will not seek an “either-or-outcome.” Jesus calls us to be reconciled, to
forgive, to be gracious and loving, no matter what. This is far more difficult to do
than to just try to get rid of them. I have another story.

When Abraham Lincoln sought to bring one of his most vocal opponents on to his
cabinet, his Secretary of War said, “Mr. President, I should think you would want to
destroy your enemies.” To which Lincoln replied, “Am I not destroying my
enemies when I make them my friends?”

When someone offends us or hurts a loved one, our first reaction is to want revenge. Here again, we must be careful what we ask for. If we accuse someone of sin, we'd better be clear about the charge. If we have a personal grievance, do we go in and accuse them? Jesus said that those who live in glass houses should not throw stones. In other words, in all things we should be humble, ever mindful of our own short-comings, our own failings, our own sins. Then, if we still feel that a wrong needs to be righted, it is our responsibility to, above all, seek reconciliation. Only if the "sin" is truly heinous should we intervene without delay but even then we should err on the side of caution just in case our biases interfere with our ability to be fair. For example, it may be difficult to understand, but virtually *all* the Arab terrorists perceive US to be terrorists because we are in effect, seeking vengeance on those responsible for 9/11. But, in so doing, we have, in our minds, lumped all Middle Eastern people together, as though they are all terrorists. In order to do this, we have to demonize them all, which justifies any military action taken against them, on the premise that our might makes right. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "This business of an eye for an eye will leave everybody blind."

Brother Martin's sentiment was echoed by Bishop Abal Muzorewa of Zimbabwe in this bit of advice:

"People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered.

Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.

Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.

Build anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you may get kicked in the teeth.

Give the world the best you've got anyway."

And I will add, forgive those who hurt you and they may hurt you again.

Forgive them anyway.

Now, I want you to hear this. This is very important:

Jesus promised that whatsoever we ask for in Jesus' name, God will be sure to grant it. If we approach life with love and grace as Jesus did, then we won't have to be so careful what we ask for because what we ask for will be in accordance with what God wants for us in the first place.

And let the people say, "Amen."