

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Stumbling: Conflict to Compassion”

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Matthew 18:15-35

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

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ ²² Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’

²³ ‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.” ²⁹ Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?” ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’

Matthew 18:15-35

Don is a hospice nurse and an Elder in the Presbyterian Church. We traveled together for a church conference at Yale. While there, the conversation turned to the topic of “church hurt.” The ways the church, and her people, can cause pain to others - sometimes without even knowing it.

Don shared his own story of church pain with the group. As one of his pastors, it was hard to hear. Don shared the refrain he repeated as he walked across doorway thresholds into a patient's room. He would say to himself, “Do no harm, Don. Do no harm. Be present with Christ’s love.”

Still holding the pain of hearing Don's story of church hurt, I remember thinking at that moment, "Yes, what if we church people took that mindful intention as each day started? Or, especially, if every time we gathered, that was our prayer?" In the name of Christ's love, "do no harm."

Today's scripture lesson ends with a strong admonition from Jesus. He teaches that if we do not do the hard work of forgiveness from our hearts, then we will be cast aside.

The stewardship of Love is not free from pain or suffering, nor conflict. Confronting what is broken is a risk worth taking. In forgiveness, the Spirit can crack open Christ's compassion. As scripture teaches, whatever is loosed on earth, is loosed in heaven. Forgiveness is hard work, and Christ's good work among us.

From the cross Jesus cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." When Peter tries to define a limit to "how much" forgiveness he could have to lean into, Jesus breaks it down. The need for forgiveness is infinite. In Greek the number represented has a sense of infinity.

There has been a long-term forgiveness study at the University of Wisconsin. The lead researcher says, "The heroic nature of forgiveness is you try, even a little bit, to be good to that other person (who wronged you), and we find, through our science, that a lot of psychological well-being visits the one who is ready and willing and chooses to forgive,"

I wonder, have you ever experienced the freedom of forgiveness? A turn away from harboring resentment, or anger, for having been hurt by another, maybe and especially in the church?

As defined by the long-term study, "Forgiveness is a willingness to abandon one's rights to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward the other."

The existential philosopher, Nietzsche, claimed that only weaklings practiced forgiveness - AND, Jesus had other ideas for us. Forgiveness is not condoning or excusing wrongdoing. Forgiveness is not the same as a legal pardon. Forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgiveness is a step towards reconciliation. Forgiveness is a personal response to one's own pain and injury by another." Desmond Tutu says of forgiveness, "If we don't deal with our past adequately, it will return to haunt us. The world is on the brink of disaster if we don't forgive, accept forgiveness, and reconcile."

Jesus tells a kingdom story about forgiveness and the elements of the process are confrontation, listening, patience and a change of heart.

Dewey's wife, Henrietta, had sparkling blue eyes and drawers full of sewing material like my Grandmother. She was sharp and served on the search committee who called me. She was in her 80's, and confessed a few times, "I'm worried about Dewey." But she couldn't name what she was worried about, specifically. But when you're married to someone for over sixty years, you just "know" what you "know."

Dewey was a retired engineer, and an Army veteran. He was always there at church with Henrietta, and he didn't say much. At Henrietta's funeral, when the hearse pulled into the cemetery he had us all stop at the gates. He said, "We will carry Henrietta to her resting place." From gates to the graveside, Dewey, their sons,

grandsons, and great-grandsons, carried Henrietta's coffin to the fresh dirt. Church members followed. We quietly made our way to the grave to make our song,

"Alleluia. She is risen indeed." And, we honored the holy together saying, "From dust we came, to dust we shall return."

Years later, as Dewey was dying, he asked his family to call for me. When I arrived, the family left the room. "I need to speak to the pastor alone." Dewey was a man of few words and he began to tell me a story. A story he had never shared, but that he had carried since he returned from, "the war." In short, he was a tank commander in the Army. He had a battalion of Sherman tanks under his care.

After D-Day, he was ordered to move his battalion towards Paris, for the liberation from the German occupation. His battalion was unexpectedly bombed, ambushed. He lost almost his entire company. Dewey bore that responsibility upon himself, alone. As he shared the story with me, he lived it again. The horror he saw when he pulled back the heavy round covers of the turrets, the sounds he heard of his men who survived the bombing, but who he knew would not live, the sights, the sounds, the smells - all of it terror-all-around.

Until that day, Dewey had never shared that story. Not with Henrietta, his sons, no one. He carried that pain all by himself - maybe a product of his gender and generation - and as he lay dying, he felt the need to confess, to ask for God's forgiveness, for not protecting those men. I listened, and cried with Dewey - sensing the depth of pain he had carried. And, assured Dewey that God's love in Jesus Christ covered every inch of his beautiful life, and I sought forgiveness.

How I wished the church had been a place where Dewey could have shared that pain, that burden - and had the body of Christ carry it with him. At his bedside I asked him, can your family know this story? Can we tell this story to them, and to the church? And through tears, he said, "yes."

The church was not a courageous or safe space for Dewey to share his secret, his deepest fear that his salvation was at stake - that he lived fearing God's judgment for what he perceived as his failure. For this church hurt, we needed God's forgiveness. I have no doubt that Jesus was there when Dewey and then his family gathered and shared his story. As Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Fast forward twenty years to another church, another city. Kim was his name, short for Kimbrough, a Vietnam Veteran, a Marine. He did not openly talk about his military service, but if questioned he would say, "When I left Vietnam, I said to myself, I am never going back." Because of that experience with Dewey - I heard Kim's confession about Vietnam.

As a part of our Summer Sunday School program, Kim agreed to tell his story, especially his story of being a pastor's son who served in Vietnam. The room was packed - people even sat on the front row.

Kim told his story. He'd started out as a munitions guy, became a perimeter guard for medical personnel as the Corps went into villages that had been bombed. The room listened. Kim repeated his familiar line, "I am never going back."

That day, Kim softened, and spoke to God's grace at work - that he now had a Vietnamese daughter-in-law, Vietnamese grandchildren, and that he and his wife had adopted a Vietnamese daughter. He wisely said to the audience that Sunday morning, "Probably wasn't my best idea to set limits upon God."

When the time came for questions Carl stood up on the front row. Kim and Carl had run high school track together and now they were in their 70's.

Carl looked at Kim, "I need to say I'm sorry. And, thank you." We had some hard words when you went off to war, and officer training, and I critiqued you as a marine while I made my way to the Peace Corp. And in all honesty - at the time - it was more about my being afraid of being drafted, not my being altruistic." Carl asked for forgiveness. In front of the church. And there we witnessed the hard work of forgiveness in the church. For a still moment, everything was copacetic.

The stewardship of Love is not free from pain or suffering. Confronting what is broken in the body, where sins of omission, and even commission, have caused hurt and pain - well - that confrontation can crack open Christ's compassion in some beautifully tender ways.

Might it be so.