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PRESERVING CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

This passage from Matthew 18 is a wonderful prescription for dealing with conflicted relationships.

- One of the greatest causes of conflict in congregations is when people fail to follow the steps JESUS presents and create tremendous disruptions in the healthy relationships of the church.
  - At the least, failure to follow these steps can lead to hurt feelings.
  - Often, though, the results can be sides taken and people even leaving the church they love.

Here's how this prescription works:

- Step One: If you have an issue with someone, talk to them, just between the two of you. - Keep it private and respectful.
- Step Two: If the other person will not listen, take two or three others to discuss the problem.
  - Hopefully they will provide needed perspective, and perhaps not just for the other person but for you.
  - In congregational issues, this might be a couple members of the executive committee, or the church council.
- Step Three: If the issue still isn't resolved, bring the matter before the church council or, if necessary, the whole church.
  - In other settings, it might be your family or workplace team.
- Step Four: If they still won't listen, then the person basically should be shunned.
  - Don't include them in those activities that are elective, and isolate them socially.

So, if someone offends you, confront them.

- If that doesn't work, do an intervention.
  - If that fails, cut them off and kick them out.

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When we read through this list, it seems pretty straight forward, like a bunch of rules—good rules, but rules, nonetheless.

- And many Christian groups have read them that way.
  - However, more than rules to live by, I think perhaps this passage is about the honor and value of relationships, and for that matter about all of our lives as Christians.

As you read through the Gospel of Matthew, it can seem at times on the all-too-legalistic side.

- But remember that Matthew was the recipient of those “treat them like a tax collector” rules.
  - He had been a tax collector and knew firsthand what it was like to be rejected and outcast.

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So, what if JESUS, or Matthew in his presentation of what JESUS is saying, isn't simply setting up rules of engagement, but rather is trying to build authentic Christian community?

- What if the point is less about having a code of conduct to follow and more about regaining a sister or brother?
- And what if the major concern here isn't actually settling disputes, but rather creating an environment where CHRIST's presence continues to bring forth forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing?

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First, it may be that the community to whom Matthew was primarily writing his Gospel was struggling with disputes.

- And he wanted them to understand the impact and consequences of leaving them unresolved.

Eight years before I became a pastor, the first congregation that I would serve became divided over the preaching of their pastor, to the point that people began to sit on one side of the church or the other, depending on whether they supported him or not.

- Everybody knew how everyone else felt, but no one talked about the issue; they just hoped it would resolve itself.
  - The pastor did finally leave, but not before severe damage was done to relationships in the congregation.
- A two-year interim and four years with my predecessor had not brought much healing.
  - My first two weeks were spent with people cornering me to tell me their side of the story and, more importantly, who those on the other side were, and how they were in the wrong and why.
- I finally told the congregation that I would be happy to listen to anyone who wanted to tell me how they felt about what had happened, but that I would not listen to any more stories of who did what.
  - Eventually, that seemed to put the issue to rest, but we never recovered the many people who left over the conflict.

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Second, it's always good to look at what comes before and/or after a passage like this.

- And the sixteenth chapter of Matthew is about vulnerability.

It starts with JESUS placing a child in the midst of disciples who are arguing about who's the greatest, and telling them to change their assumptions and criteria for greatness.

- Beyond redefining greatness in terms of humility, JESUS implores them to welcome those who are vulnerable like a child,
  - and HE says, when they do so, they are welcoming HIM.

The next section is about avoiding harming "these little ones"—the vulnerable members of the community—at all costs,

- and that it would be better to lose part of one of one's own physical body than damaging the relationship with a member of the communal body of CHRIST.
  - Moreover, JESUS is saying that our choices affect more than just those in the relationship;
    - they can affect and infect the larger body.

Then comes Matthew's version of the lost sheep, pointing out GOD'S concern not to lose any of the community,

- even those who have gone astray.

In total, when included with this portion of the Gospel, JESUS is telling us that we have to be vulnerable.

- We are to put our comfort and, frankly, ourselves on the line, to make ourselves vulnerable, seeking to restore and save relationships,
  - so that ultimately, the community, the body of CHRIST is kept whole and made stronger through the effort to build bridges that connect and not create walls that divide.

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Therefore, the third thing this passage says is about the lengths to which we should go to reconnect with someone who has "gone astray," or who has "sinned against you."

- When it comes to disruptions in the community, don't give up.
- Don't give up without trying, or after trying just one thing.
  - Try everything you can think of before letting another be bound to the consequences of their sin.

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Fourth, conversation is central to this process—conversation between both parties.

- First you talk to the one who your feel has fallen short.
- Then you bring one or two more to talk.
- Then the larger community joins the discussion, all in the hopes of restoring the community to wholeness.
  - And if you think that sounds like a lot of effort, JESUS sets the tone in the next passage, where Peter asks if forgiving someone seven times is enough,
    - JESUS tells him that seventy times seven is more realistic of how hard we need to try to make restoration happen.

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Fifth and finally, if we are still intimidated and uncertain about such conversations, verse 19 also has some words for us.

- Instead of reading it like some magic formula—“if you can get two or three people to agree and pray, GOD will do it”—
  - perhaps we need to see it as more of a promise of the outcome of reconciliation.
- When we heal our divisions and come together in Christian love and shared mission,
  - GOD is powerfully at work and nothing is impossible.
- Moreover, JESUS promises that when we are at this work of reconciliation—
  - that is, when we come together as a community to address our differences, resolve our disputes, seek to end conflict, and repair relationships—GOD is there—always.
    - Supporting, encouraging, and blessing our efforts.
      - We are not alone, and that’s why we don’t give up.

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All of this strikes me as remarkably timely as we deal with aftermath or a pandemic, economic uncertainty, racial injustice, cries for reform, and a polarized political landscape.

- The heart of this passage is about Christian community—what it is, how it suffers, how to address hurt, and what healed community can do.

What kind of community are we going to be?

- Can we look at those around us and believe and affirm that even those who disagree with us on important issues are nevertheless followers of JESUS?
- Can we imagine that the goal of our community is to nurture relationships inside and outside the congregation?
- Can we commit to going to great lengths—including tolerating those who disagree with us—even about who should be our next president—to engage in conversation, hoping that we listen to one another?

Perhaps if we actively commit to seeing one another as “little ones” who deserve our care and compassion--

- perhaps if we strive to be less assertive and more humble—
- perhaps if we evaluate our words and our actions and how we spend our time on the basis of a simple, but huge question:
  - “does this build up the body of CHRIST and nurture our relationships?”
    - then we might be more likely to find JESUS in our midst.
- For it is in the acts of service and kindness and reconciliation that JESUS dwells, and where HE invites us live.

We are called to reach out, to engage, to advocate and care for the vulnerable who have gone astray.

- And as we do, JESUS will be there. Always!