

Pentecost A-17, 2008

Matthew 18: 15-20

September 7, 2008

Title: Growing in God's Hands

Prayer: Oh Lord, life is short and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those with whom we walk the way. Therefore, let us be swift to love and make haste to be kind in the name of Jesus, our companion on the way. Amen.

When it comes to shopping I am a typical male. I don't go to the store to walk up and down the aisles, casually looking, just enjoying being there. I go, I only go, when I know what I'm going for.

So I made my annual trip to the Crabtree Valley Mall to purchase Sally's birthday gift. I knew exactly what I would purchase and at this particular store, it would gift wrap that present for free.

Well, at the wrapping counter there was a long line. And it became evident that one of the employees was new to her job. She was deliberate and asked her colleague quite a few questions.

So here's what happened: Together with the two women in front of me, we'd been waiting for about 10 minutes, when off the elevator came a man who walked right past us and went to the counter and this poor employee began to attend to him.

I spoke up inviting this man to wait his turn.

It didn't go well. He went right ahead, didn't apologize and as he walked off, said something rather snide to me: Hope you feel better! But I got the last word in, I said: I'd feel better if you'd have waited in line like the rest of us.

That confrontation may have done me a lot of good, but it deflated that poor employee. She felt so, so bad. As I replay that event over and over I'm not sure if what I did was the right thing.

What if the offending man had come at me?
What if he had a weapon? What if the situation had
escalated?

It's little wonder we shrink from speaking up. Ours is a day and age dominated by privacy and individualism. The unspoken commandment of our day is—**WE DON'T WANT TO INTRUDE ON OTHERS AND WE EXPECT THEM TO RETURN THE FAVOR.** So there is this impenetrable boundary. If I don't like you or you don't like me I leave you alone; you leave me alone. But that's not the teaching of Christ. God in Christ intends rich, deep relatedness. **SO MUCH SO THAT GOD CAME IN JESUS TO RECONCILE HIMSELF TO US, CONFRONTING OUR SIN WITH THE CROSS.** You can't live under this cross without seeing how it contradicts the easy way of indifference.

So what do we do when there is conflict in the church. Time and time again we hear it said about church—I go there for sanctuary, for refuge from the world of conflict. I want my church to be a place of peace. So with that expectation, how do you live as church when you are at odds? When your expectations are for uninterrupted harmony?

Someone has said, “The mark of a true Christian Community is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of a reconciling spirit.” It's a false idol to expect a faith community to live without conflict. It's a failure of our faith to live without reaching out to those with whom we differ.

Healthy conflict exposes what we believe. It brings to the surface what matters most. In 2006 when our leadership put before this congregation eight evangelism and outreach goals for our 25th anniversary, it caused quite a stir. By elevating these ministry goals, we had to look at our priorities, what we valued. We need healthy conflict about our priorities---how much shall we invest in serving ourselves while serving others?

Is it in keeping with who God has called us together to devote ourselves to strife torn Zimbabwe? What are we saying about the value of our

worship life when many of our children during the school year aren't in worship? Are we willing to debate our Sunday school curriculum? When you see our strategic plan for the next 5 years will you prayerfully roll up your sleeves.

The mark of a true Christian community is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of a reconciling spirit. May God in Christ stir us with healthy conflict.

For about the last two weeks I've run into the same spider web while entering our home. Both in the evening after dark and in the early morning, there it is. This single tread stretching across a space of some 5 feet. So I've broken that thread twice daily. And that persistent spider has re-woven that strand of thread, across that chasm repeatedly. Twice a day, every day there it is. I break it with my face; and it's there again.

Truly amazing. What an image for not letting someone go who has wronged us. Jesus commands his church to spin a thread of exhortation when there is the breach of sin. Not the person who has committed the sin who takes that risk. Rather the one who has been offended. Don't sit on your grievances, fuming, but seek to regain a lost relationship. And if the person refuses, spin that thread with others and if necessary with the whole church.

Here we have an obligation to one another. I have an obligation to tell you if you are messing up.

To live unreconciled without offering the thread diminishes us.

The spirit of the community is impacted. We have said in our mission statement that we value belonging, we yearn for connectedness.

In our 25th anniversary year, how mature in faith are we?

To reach out to those who have wronged us in to embody the life of Jesus. It's to care the way he does. It's to be so grounded in his mercy and understand our need for it, that we offer it to others.

What a profound promise Jesus makes: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." We wrongly

sentimentalize this. Assuming it's about that harmony, that peace we so want. But Jesus has the audacity to promise, that when we come together to address our hurts, he's there with us.

There, precisely there, when you take the step to lovingly confront.

There, precisely there, when you yearn to restore life with another and face the discord.

There, precisely there is Jesus, when you risk the hurt being deeper, because you value this other who has offended you.

My brothers and sisters, how are we growing in God's Hands? Where is the power of Jesus' reconciling love evidenced in your life? Has the spirit of Jesus gotten into us so that we extend ourselves, even our wounded selves to someone who has sinned against us?

A 25th Anniversary is not a time to pat ourselves on the back;

It's a time to discern the hand of Christ on our back pushing us to live our faith with each other. Maybe it's time for us to say we will not settle for indifference, we will not let our sin dominate us, we will live the full meaning of our faith. And that now more than any time as we peer into the future God has in store for us, we picture a people so bound up in life together, that we will exhort each other to grow.

--How can I assist you to grow in Bible study?

--How is it with your heart?

--Can I be the thread you need to live the full life God in Christ intends for us?

Jesus concludes his instruction on loving confrontation with the honest recognition that it may not be resolved. Treat someone as a Gentile or a tax collector. It seems harsh. You let someone go.

But then we remember that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, gentiles. He demonstrated that he cared deeply about lost brothers and sisters.

When we care enough to disciple, we too pay the price of the spirit of reconciliation, a spirit that Christ calls us to.

You may not be in line at the store when you are called to speak up. You may be dialing a sister or a brother in Christ on the phone saying,

“We need to talk.” Jesus is with you.