

Denice K. Leslie
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17th After Pentecost
Matthew 18: 15 – 20

“Speaking the Truth in Love”



I served a couple of years in North Indiana in a church way out in the corn and soy beans some twenty miles from the nearest town. Being a native Californian I found the culture of this Midwestern rural area to be very different from what I'd grown up with.

First of all, these folks had all lived on the land for generations. As a result, everyone in the congregation was related to everyone else by blood or by marriage—not to mention being close friends through farming co-ops, grange and church activities.

Well, as human nature would have it, an active layman in my congregation had a wandering eye and decided to have an affair with another active laywoman. She kept him at arms length but was emotionally open to him and they began to see each other.

The man's wife found out about it of course and came to me. I proposed the two women get together with me to have a talk. Yeah, I know I'm crazy right?

I mean when I got them together in my office, and we had prayer, stated the purpose of our meeting together and laid down the ground rules, my heart was pounding so hard in my chest it felt like it was going to explode.

And the thought crossed my mind that this could be a nuclear bomb in this congregation if this didn't go well.

But it did go well. You see, these two women knew they had to work it out. They had to work it out because the whole community out there—the church, the school, the farming interests, formed a critical mass of relationships that insisted things like this get worked out. If they don't get worked out—everybody suffers—there's no anonymity—they all have to live together, depend on each other; there kids marry into each others families—they share so much-- and that means resolving your differences fast and up front.

And to this day they still live, go to church, and work in that community as farmers together. And yes, the man with the wandering eye is still married to his wife—they've gone on to counseling and well, I know the community who soon got wind of it—no secrets in a close knit community--keeps him in line.

Today Jesus talks about learning to resolve our differences as the family of Christ for the sake of the mission of the church. We, like the farmers in the community I served, are all related. Our relationship is that of being children of God saved by Jesus Christ for a mission larger than ourselves. We are family by virtue of the fact that we are the body of Christ. There is so much in the outside world that would divide us, that would tempt us, that would draw us off with unworthy distractions. There is so much in our own egos that beg us for attention at other people's expense that without some mutual accountability—old Satan will simply pick us off one at a time until there is no faithful or effective body of Christ left to show and share the love of Jesus. Our own neediness having defeated us, our mission will be undermined and ineffective.

As a consequence, Jesus says, it is very important to hold one another accountable—and to do it by watching over

one another in love. And that means having the courage to speak the truth in love.

Now let's look at this passage. What does Jesus recommend that we do? First he says, go to the one who has wronged you and speak to them directly, in private about it.

What is the point of this? The point is the hope of regaining the other person.

Granted, that's not the reason most of us fantasize in our heads about when we imagine just what we'd like to say to someone and so for the way they've hurt us is it?

And usually it is our anger that keeps us from engaging the other person. It's so much easier to go tell everyone else about it. Confrontation is scary.

But Jesus is about reconciliation. Jesus is about saving relationships and making them whole.

Going to our friends for sympathy and turning them against the person who has hurt you may be easier—I don't know about you but when someone I care about is hurt by someone else, my first instinct is to be angry at the offender, “how dare they?” —But as Christians we have to ask ourselves, what about this choice of activity results in reconciliation? What about this kind of behavior results in my taking responsibility for my part of the problem? Unless I am very fortunate to have a good friend who loves me warts and all and loves me enough to speak the truth in love to me?

When I was growing up and one of my friends or my brothers offended me I would go complaining to my mother. You know what she would say? And what did YOU do to her or him? Hmm...I didn't want to think about that—taking responsibility for my own actions wasn't what I had in mind. Much more satisfying to have the tea and sympathy of my friends to shore up my wounded ego, play the innocent victim and nurse my wounds “There, there now! Poor thing.”

Sympathy is not a bad thing. Everyone needs sympathy. But once we've had an opportunity to have our feelings affirmed, Jesus calls us to go to the next step of growing up in him: reconciliation—regaining our brother or sister's relationship.

Jesus doesn't have time for wounded egos—or for wounds at all. He certainly didn't allow his to keep him in that old tomb—He wants them healed. He wants us to step to the plate and grow up and get over it by using what he gave us: a spine for justice and the courage to transform sin into wholeness!

Jesus is about turning woundedness into new life!

Confronting our offender with his or her behavior does two things:

First, it tells them they have caused hurt, intentionally or unintentionally. They may not know! As hard as that is to fathom—most folks are not mind readers, and most folks are not so calculating that they lie in bed at night and dream up ways to make our lives miserable.

Second, it holds them accountable—to you as that person's brother or sister in Christ and to God for their discipleship.

So how are we supposed to do this? First, Jesus says, go to the person in private. That means taking some time to think through how you feel, what happened and what you need to tell the person.

This is not the same thing as getting mad, grabbing someone right then and there, regardless of where, and dumping your anger on them. That's when nuclear bombs go off! That's when relationships go sour and it is very, very hard to take back angry words and actions no matter how ashamed you may be later.

The lady whose husband was going astray, she wanted to go to the other woman and just let her have it during coffee hour on a Sunday morning—that was her first plan—but something brought her in to see her pastor—

probably the nudgings and warnings of the Holy Spirit and she listened and came in.

As we talked about it, she worked through her feelings and by the time we set up the meeting she was determined and calm.

Sitting eye to eye with someone and having a conversation forcefully reminds us that no one is a single or two dimensional being. Everyone has good points as well as bad points. When we talk to each other the wall between us is lessened.

Not so if we only talk to other people. The wall simply builds. And every time we interact in some way with the offender our tendency is to be defensive and to look for another brick to add to our wall – to confirm our mad feelings, to gather in our friends and chose up sides until the wall is so high, we can no longer see over it and the offender is now our enemy for life—less than human, not worthy of my respect or my time—or those of my friends.

The result? I have allowed my hurt feelings to cause me to fall into sin. I have allowed the other person to go on without ever having the opportunity of changing or accepting responsibility for their behavior.

But what if that doesn't work? I mean I would think once I went to my offender t and it didn't make any difference that I'd be off the hook.

Jesus says no. Boy, this gets hard! He says, 'If the person won't listen then take another member of the church with you.'

Having a witness present sometimes is enough to help the other person—who may be just as hurt as you are and just as offended by you, to pause and listen and think before lambasting you with anger defensiveness.

In a congregation I served I had a Trustee show up at a meeting clearly under the influence of alcohol. His behavior towards me was reprehensible. No one in the room did a thing about it. I left there nearly in tears. I was a very young, inexperienced pastor.

The next day he called and apologized and unfortunately I was so relieved I rushed in with grace let it go. And when that happened in the conversation he immediately went back into denial that there was really any problem here.

I instantly regretted not holding him to account by to saying something like, “You know this is a problem that needs to be addressed. Come in and let's talk about some options. In the meantime your attendance at church meetings while under the influence of alcohol is unacceptable. If you chose to drink do not come.”

Two other Trustees called me to apologize for the man's behavior that same day. . But they would not go to the man and hold him accountable. They felt it was none of their business.

Jesus says today when our brother or sister sins against us *it is our business*. It's our business because of the effects sin has on the world—on other people besides us—as well as on the offender. And this is why it is also the business of the church. In the case of the man with adultery on his mind, we represent Christ to the world and his behavior was immoral.

In the case of the drunk Trustee—he was a one of two M.D.'s in town. It turned out he would respond to calls at the hospital to deliver babies drunk. But no one would go to him about it.

Jesus says if the person won't listen, we are to take another person with us. And if that doesn't work, tell it to the whole church and if THAT doesn't work, then treat the person as a tax collector or a gentile.

Hmm. We do not like to judge people do we? Jesus instructions are not about judging others. But Jesus is about us loving others.



Tax collectors and gentiles were people judged by Jesus' religious community as sinners, not as righteous as they were and to be looked down on.

Jesus takes a different approach. When the religious leaders criticize him for eating with tax collectors and sinners, he tells them that the well have no need for a physician. He did not come to save the righteous but to save the lost.

In other words we are to open our hearts to those who go astray, even those who offend us and treat them as persons who needs to hear the good news of God's grace and love for them.

It's all about learning to speak the truth in love by watching over one another in love. It's all about being willing to be accountable and to hold ourselves accountable before the Lord.

After all, Jesus also says this morning, wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them.

So, Jesus is reminding us, we can run, or avoid, but we really cannot hide from our Lord and Savior. And believe it or not, THAT's good news!