

“Living in Peace”

Matthew 18:21-35

First Presbyterian Church
September 6, 2020

In an old U.S. Army training manual, there's some practical advice for sergeants on how to handle the case of two soldiers who keep arguing with one another. Assign them both to wash the same window, one on the outside, the other inside. As they stand there with their cleaning-solution and rags, moving them in the same circular motion, they can't help but look at each other's faces. As they do, they realize they have more in common than they have differences. They may even start laughing, as the common problem – a dirty window – takes precedence over their petty conflict.

Now that's Army know-how! In today's New Testament lesson about conflict and reconciliation, we get a taste of Jesus know-how. Jesus is teaching how to resolve conflicts in the church, but this is good for anyone you're not getting along with, anyone you don't see eye-to-eye with, whether that's in your family, your school or workplace, the neighborhood, and of course church, and I suppose, the Army. “If another member of the church sins against you (or has wronged you),” says Jesus, “go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member (or friend or coworker, classmate or whomever) listens to you, you have regained that one.”

“*If*” another person wrongs you, says Jesus. Oh, boy! What an optimist he is. Shouldn't that be “when” someone wrongs us? Who here listening today has never been hurt or angered by someone? Crickets, right. We all have. But God love him, Jesus is an optimist, and we wouldn't have it any other way. He's also a realist. He says, “But *if* you are not listened to ...,” and that one is an “if,” isn't it? There's no guarantee the other person will listen to us, right? The art of listening is kind of a lost art these days. That's why there's so much conflict in our world. There's too much “attitude,” and not enough listening.

So let's *listen* to what Jesus teaches about listening. Let's listen to Jesus' teachings as if our lives depend on it. Because they do – our spiritual, emotional and mental health depends on being able to square things with those who've wronged us. And our health as a nation – as a world – depends on more people taking the time listen and be civil with one another.

So, Step 1: “If the (other person) listens to you” Notice, it doesn't say, “If the other person apologizes to you or begs forgiveness from you,” but rather, “If the (other person) listens to you....”

The goal here is for two people to communicate with one another openly and honestly. Open and honest communication requires three things: a sender of the message, a receiver, and a channel through which the message is transmitted. Here, you are the sender, the other person is the receiver and – if Jesus has anything to say about it – the Holy Spirit is the channel.

Your job as the sender is to simply state what's what. The who, what, when, where and why. Who said or did what – just the facts. When, where and why – why did it bother you. Own your own feelings by saying something like, "It made me sad," or whatever. Not "you" made me sad, but rather "it" – what you said or did – "made my sad." No one can argue with that. That's how you felt.

Notice that you're not being negative here, or accusatory. You're just saying, "Can we talk? I just want to tell you ..." – and then simply give the who, what, where, when and why, or how – how you felt.

So, first ask permission with a simply "can we talk?" and then – if they say, "OK," be open and honest in a genuine and gentle way. This ensures the Holy Spirit will be the channel for that communication, and that you have done your part.

Of course, if they say, "No; I don't want to talk with you," then the other person is not willing to listen to you. If the other person is not willing to listen to you, Jesus says, go to Step 2. According to Jesus, Step 2 is, "... Take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses."

OK, who really ever wants to go to Step 2. Nobody! Only in the most extreme cases do we dare to go to Step 2. We're either too afraid, it's too much bother, or we're too angry; we'd rather hold a grudge while complaining to someone else about that person.

And yet, going directly to other person is something Jesus taught because this is important. It is important for your spiritual, emotional and mental health, and it is important for the health of our nation and our world. And it begins with you, with us, being willing to build a little muscle when it comes to our communication skills and our approach to conflict and reconciliation.

In Step 2, Jesus tells us to take one or two others because, as he says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." You know, we Presbyterians like to do things in twos and threes and fours, and, you name it. In other words, we like to do things by committee.

This is not just because we like spending time together, which we do. It's not because we love meetings, which we don't. Not particularly. But we do love the process of discerning the will of God through the open discussion of ideas and a consensus about God's will. For us as individuals, of course, sometimes it results in good news and sometimes its bad news – this discernment process.

For instance, good news: The Presbyterian Women voted to send you a get-well card. Bad news: It was a close vote; 11 to 10. You almost didn't get your card. Luckily, though the Holy Spirit prevailed on your behalf, through an open discussion of ideas and a representative consensus about God's will. You're going to get your card. The point is, the Holy Spirit is with us in our discernment – even about get-well cards.

So, Step 2: Don't give up. It's too important to just give up after Step 1 if you find the other person has his or her heels dug in. And not because we need to get our way or need to be right. But because it's terrible to go through life with your heels dug in, with anger in your heart and a grudge festering in your soul. And as Christians, we don't want that for the other person. We want them – and us – to feel at peace in each other's company. And that's what Jesus wants, too.

Step 2: take one or two people with you – mom or dad, your pastor or church friend, teacher or boss, principle or boss's boss – and say, "I know you weren't willing to talk before, but I wanted to try again. You mean too much to me – as a friend, as a brother or sister, coworker, fellow Christian, fellow human being – you mean too much to me to not try again. What do you say? Let's see if we can get beyond this, can't we?"

If the other person listens – just listens – you've done your job. The rest is up to the Holy Spirit. However they respond is OK with you. It's their feelings, too, after all; their perspective; their readiness to move on. But at least you've done your job, and the door is open.

Then Jesus says, "If the member (or friend or acquaintance) refuses to listen to (you in the presence of the others), 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."

Now, of course, Step 3 here, is equally important, whether we're talking about taking it to the Session at church, Human Resources at work, the principle at school, a court of law, or a family meeting. Step 3 is important because we have panels of discernment and authority over us for a reason. To keep the peace, and that's what this is all about. But even more important than actually taking Step 3 is what comes after Step 3.

After Step 3, if the person refuses to listen – or to participate in a process of open communication and civil reconciliation, Jesus says they should be treated like Gentiles and tax-collectors! And just how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax-collectors? He loved them! He continued to love them, in his heart, unconditionally, even if they wouldn't listen. And so should we, both for their sake and for ours. For their sake because the door is always open to them when they get like that and – open to us when we get like that , if we follow Jesus' teachings.

We keep the door open for their sake through a Spirit of unconditional love, and we do it for our sake, too. Because when we've done what we can and have kept the door open, we are set free from the grudge and anger. We can rest assured, confident that the Holy Spirit is still at work and the person may still come around. They may, or they may not. Not all people are open to reconciliation; we're not always open to reconciliation.

People – us included – can take themselves out of the church, they can take themselves out of the family, they can take themselves out of your circle of friends at school and group of colleagues at work. But Jesus is always ready to take them back in. And so must we.

We must always be ready to embrace a wayward brother or sister, friend or foe – not because it's easy – it's not. Not for our sake alone, but for theirs. Not for their sake alone, but for the sake of the future of this nation and the salvation of the world. For the sake of Jesus Christ, who is always with us, ready to broker peace, wherever two or three are gathered in his name. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

O Lord, we come before you with the assurance that when two or more are gathered in your name, you are with us. We lift up our hearts to you and ask that you purify them of any discourse against our fellow brothers and sisters.

We lift up our prayers for those in need, and particularly those struggling with illness and disease, and those whose burdens would be lifted by drawing nearer to you

We pray for ourselves, O God, that you would draw us near to you now. For we know our inner needs, and your desire to bring us to a place of peace and fulfillment. Wash our souls with water – holy and pure – that we would know hope – fresh and new.

May the blood of Christ – who offered himself as an unblemished sacrifice for all – cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death – spiritual and otherwise – so that we may live to serve and praise you and come to do your will.

We pray for all who seek to do your will, and particularly those whose labors are great and burdens heavy. Grant them a holy rest from their toils this Labor Day weekend.

For it was you, O Lord, who taught us how to discern and align with God's will, so plainly made know to us through the prayer that you taught us, which we prayer together now, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen**