

“Where Two or Three Are - I Am There”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church - Indianapolis, Indiana  
September 6, 2020

**Matthew 18: 15-20**

The first congregation I served in ministry was Williams Memorial Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. It was founded in 1885, and it was during our time there that both Erin and Heather were born - at Presbyterian Hospital, no less! I had the occasion to preach on this passage from Matthew while I was at Williams, and I did a little research in their church's Session minutes leading up to that sermon.

What I learned was that the Session of that congregation faced a crisis within its first eight months of ministry. It was not over a lack of money, or how the flowers in the sanctuary were going to be arranged, or who was going to lead the choir or play the piano. No, the crisis they faced was what they were going to do with one, and later more, of its members.

The Session minutes from 1885 and 1886 read as follows:

*It having appeared that Mr. G. W. Little and Mr. Thomas Douglas both have been guilty of unchristian conduct, I. A. Frazier was appointed to wait on Mr. Little and talk with him on the subject and J. C. Hutchison to wait on Mr. Douglas (12/20/1885).*

*Hutchison reported that he had seen Mr. Thomas Douglas and he gave satisfaction. It having appeared that Miss Ida E. Puckette and Miss Cora I. Puckette guilty of dancing, Mr. B. F. Brown was appointed to wait on them and report at the next meeting (1/31/1886).*

*Mr. Brown reported that he had seen Miss Cora I. Puckette and Mrs. Ida E. Roberts and Mr. W. J. Puckette and Mr. J. T. White and wife and Miss Emma L. White about dancing and they all gave satisfaction except Mr. White (3/14/1886).*

And then, on about three occasions, a Mr. G. W. Little was called before the Session for “the sin of drunkenness.” He clearly had a problem, because over and over it was recorded that he came before the session and gave satisfaction, only to be cited again for the sin of intemperance. Apparently, the Session even adopted a policy that it would be announced from the pulpit after you had been cited three times for such offenses (1/8/1888). And even though he had been kept from receiving the sacrament of communion because of his behavior, Mr. Little was eventually restored to full communion with the congregation, giving satisfaction to the Session that he had repented of his sin (5/13/1888).

Now, I didn't get a chance to read through the Session minutes of John Knox this week, but I wonder if I would find anything similar! I

don't know if the Session of Williams Memorial had in mind this morning's passage from Matthew as their guide in these deliberations, but clearly that sounds awfully similar to Jesus' instructions! To consider taking these steps as a Session or as a leader in the church is uncomfortable for us today, as we don't wish to appear judgmental or intrusive into people's private life. But the cases I have shared were not reasons to exclude people from the church; instead they reflected the desire of Jesus to live in forgiveness and reconciliation as the body of Christ, the Church.

Now, read out of context, this passage on discipline in the church seems a bit harsh, as one commentator says, "like a legal manual on how to deal with someone else's sin, what steps to take en route to a member's excommunication" (Gaventa, Texts for Preaching, Year A, 476). But when we look at the whole of chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel, this passage takes on a deeper and clearer meaning. "From beginning to end it points in quite a different direction from that of self-righteousness and harsh judgment. When the disciples ask, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' a child is placed in their midst, and Jesus says, 'Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (18:4).' Then the disciples are warned against putting stumbling blocks in the way of others and are invited to be self-conscious about their own manner of life (vs. 6-9) . . . Following today's reading, comes the word to Peter that forgiveness cannot be calculated. God does not keep a scorecard of rights and wrongs, and neither can we. Finally, the chapter concludes with the memorable parable of the servant who accepts from the king the generous release of indebtedness, but cannot forgive one of his fellow servants a relatively paltry amount (18:23-25). Withholding forgiveness to a fellow human being raises questions as to whether one has really discovered God's forgiveness (ibid)."

In light of this, forgiveness and restoration to wholeness become the clear aims of Jesus' teaching in today's passage. The passage begins, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone" (18:15). If one within the community of faith sins against you, you are called on to take the first step, not the sinner. That is risky, and it goes against our human nature. Usually the last thing we want to do is face the person who has hurt us, has caused us pain. Why should we - the sinnee, as it were - be the ones to first seek forgiveness and reconciliation?

Because the Body of Christ is not healthy when it is divided, but only when it is whole. Situations of alienation cannot be glossed over or treated with no importance. "Nothing is gained by overlooking the injury, by not talking about it in hopes that it will soon go away. Forgiveness never happens by default. It occurs in the risky encounter between the alienated parties" (ibid, 477). And Jesus instructs the

disciples to seek restoration to wholeness in many ways. If an individual encounter does not work, then bring two or three members of the church with you. And if that does not yield fruit, then call on the entire church to hopefully cause the individual to listen (18:16-17). Why take those steps? Because in the presence of two or three in the church, Christ is present with us. And in sharing those experiences, we as the church are prayerfully seeking Christ's actions in our midst.

But to take that first step of forgiveness is never an easy thing to do. Barbara Brown Taylor writes: *In case you haven't noticed, Christianity is a religion in which the sinners have all the advantages. They can step on your feet fifty times and you are supposed to keep smiling. They can talk bad about you every time you leave the room and it is your job to excuse them with no thought of getting even. The burden is on you, because you have been forgiven yourself, and God expects you to do unto others as God has done unto you.*

*This is not a bad motivation for learning how to forgive . . . Better I should confess my own sins than keep track of yours, only it is hard to stay focused on my shortcomings. I would so much rather stay focused on yours, especially when they are hurtful to me.*

*Staying angry with you is how I protect myself from you. Refusing to forgive you is not only how I punish you; it is also how I keep you from getting close enough to hurt me again, and nine times out of ten it works, only there is a serious side effect. It is called bitterness, and it can do terrible things to the human body and soul . . . So there is another motivation for learning how to forgive - not only because we owe it to God but because we owe it to ourselves. Because resentment deforms us. Because unforgiveness is a boomerang. We use it to protect ourselves - to hurt back before we can be hurt again - but it has a sinister way of circling right back at us so that we become the victims of our own ill will* (*Gospel Medicine*, Cowley Publications, 1995: 9-11).

For the last six months, we have been forced out of our comfort zones, removed from our normal routines, and we have been made to look at the world differently that we once did. It has happened and is happening in all aspects of our lives - home, work, school, church, and so on. We've had to look at things from a different perspective.

I've thought about that feeling the last few Sunday mornings sitting up here during worship. Because of social distancing, we had to rearrange our worship space. Before, the worship leaders would sit on the front row of the congregation, with all of you behind us, coming up front to lead the service. Now, we are sitting up here, where the choir would normally sit, facing you the entire time. In some ways, it allows me to keep an eye on all of you! But in reality, it has given me a new way to view what had become very familiar - perhaps even something I had taken for granted.

I think there is a lesson there in how we look at forgiveness. It can be very easy to stay in our set perspective of “she’s wrong, I’m right, this is never going to change.” Trust me – I know firsthand how easy it is to get entrenched into that mindset. But what Jesus is calling us as the church to do in this passage is to move around and see things in a different way. Don’t see the hurts and pains only the way the world wants us to see them; see them as God sees them – through the grace and love we know in Jesus Christ. When we move our seat and see them in a new light, we are reminded of the forgiveness first shown to us in God’s only Son. If we cannot offer that same forgiveness to those who sin against us, then how are we to fully accept God’s forgiveness of us in Jesus Christ? Only through such selfless acts will we as the church be reconciled and made whole, and then reflect God’s love to a broken and hurting world.

What gives me hope about this never-ending challenge of the Christian life is that we don’t have to do it alone. “Wherever two or three are, I am there,” Jesus says. Those two or three can be in-person in a small group, or on the phone while catching-up, or on a Zoom meeting for a bible study. I know this has been a time of great isolation for many. But we don’t have to allow that to be the final word – for Christ is present whenever we are together, in whatever form or manner.

Before the pandemic, my gaze would always be centered on the Celtic Cross above the organ. Now, my eyes are drawn to the stained-glass window with the dove – a symbol of the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Comforter. Perhaps that is my reminder that by shifting my seat, I’m called to see God moving in my life in a new and different way. I pray you will have a similar experience in your calling as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.