

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 10, 2017

“In the Midst of God’s People.”

Matthew 18:15-20

About a month ago, I had a conversation with a clerk in a local store. She told me she had an argument with a pastor years ago and got so angry she never went back to church. She said, “Don’t you think I can be just as good a Christian communing with God in the beauty of my back yard as I can be if I were going to church?” I took a deep breath and said, “No, I don’t. I’m not at all sure that we can be God’s people without putting ourselves in the midst of God’s people. I need those other people to learn with, to give and receive help, and to be my extended family.”

Here in Matthew, Jesus says faith is not a private matter. Jesus promised to be in our midst when two or three of us are gathered together, not when we are off by ourselves.

We learn this in our families. When families work right, they are God’s way of teaching us to share, work together, and care for each other. Growing up in a family helps us learn that we cannot have everything our own way. We learn to compromise and rub up against each other in ways that knock off some of our rough edges.

Living in a family also can teach us how to fight. If you grew up with brothers and sisters you know what I mean. I had both, a brother and three sisters when I grew up so I had plenty of practice. Another little brother joined the family when I was almost seventeen. I was in the middle for many years, two above and two below, and had a hard time winning a fight with any of my siblings. That doesn’t mean if you have a problem, for heaven’s sake keep it to yourself because harmony is more important than truth or feelings.

Jesus says that the Christian family does not work well with silence. In the household of God, when your sister is against you, you must go and talk to her. If that doesn’t work, you must keep going back, taking others with you, doing anything in your power to get your sister back again.

Barbara Brown Taylor points out two interesting things about Jesus’ advice. The first is that he puts the burden on the victim, on the person that has been sinned against. It is up to the person who has been hurt to go to the person who has done the hurting. Second, Jesus seems much less interested in who is right and who is wrong than he is in getting the family back together again. It’s important that we listen to each other and keep trying to mend the relationship. We shouldn’t pretend that nothing has happened.

When we are fighting with someone there are several ways we can react. Some of us pretend that nothing happened. Forget the unkind words that were said or the coat that was never returned. Don’t get angry. Just let it go. Ignoring is better than a fight.

A second way we can react to conflict is giving the cold shoulder. We just avoid the person completely and never ask about what really happened between us.

A third strategy is revenge. We take every chance we get to put him down or make a joke at his expense. We think that revenge will make us feel better, but it doesn’t.

When we fight in these ways, we create for ourselves a kind of living hell. There is a haunting picture of hell created by the writer C.S. Lewis. It’s especially alarming because it sounds too much like the place where many of us live right now. For Lewis, hell is a gray city inhabited only at its outer edges. It has rows and rows of empty houses in the middle. Those houses in the middle are empty because everyone who once lived there has fought with their neighbors and moved. Then they quarreled with their new neighbors and moved again. This is how hell got so enormous, says Lewis, Empty at the center and inhabited only on the edges. It happened because all the people who fought with each other chose distance instead confrontation. So, hell spreads and leaves a large deserted center with people scattered around on the fringe.

Confrontation brings people face to face to talk things through and come to a solution. That is what this gospel recommends. And it is that many of us would do just about anything to avoid coming face to face. We have lots of excuses. It was her fault, not mine. Why should I go to her? If I tell her about my hurt feelings, she just hurt them again. These excuses are just fine if we don’t mind living on the outskirts of hell. They will not do for those of us who are called to live in Christian community. For us there is something more important than being right or wrong, and that something is keeping the family together. The problem is not the brother or sister who sins against us. The real problem is our own determination to defend ourselves against them regardless of the cost.

There is another way to deal with conflict according to Jesus. We can go to the person and tell them what we think is wrong. We can even admit we might be wrong. (That’s a great way to mend a fight.) Jesus urges us to do this, to do everything possible to win back a relationship that is in danger of being lost.

So, go ahead and make that phone call or set up the lunch date or write the letter. If you do, you will help stop the spread of hell. If the thought of making that call scares you, don't let that stop you. There is not a word in today's reading about wanting to reach out. Just go, it says, and do everything you can to win back that relationship.

In a lot of ways, it is a real bother to be a member of a family. It would be so much easier if we were just a bunch of individuals whose affairs are private, just between me and God. But here Jesus says clearly that there is no such thing as privacy in the family of God. Life together is where we come to know each other and God.

When someone wrongs us, we are to be the first to reach out, even when we are not the guilty one, even when all we really want to do is fight back. We are called to be family, to confront and make up, to forgive and be forgiven, to heal and be healed. God is asking us to throw a block party right in the middle of the deserted center of hell and fill the place with such music and laughter that the residents who have moved away come creeping back to the center to find out what all the joy is about. Amen.