

GOSPEL: Matthew 18:15–20 – Building Community

Grace to you and peace from God our creator, our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Several weeks ago, I was in the airport in Richmond, Virginia, browsing in one of the stores and I came across the book *The Giver*. I remembered I had purchased a copy several years ago, but hadn't read it, and I also remembered that I heard it was being made into a movie. When I saw that the book had received the Newberry Award, I decided to purchase it and thanks to a storm over Chicago and United Airlines, I finished the book before my plane landed in Chicago.

In the book, the main character, an eleven year old boy, lives in a community that has decided to make "sameness" most important. Babies are raised their first year of life by people called nurturers. Young children who are three are taught the precision of language. They also wear jackets with buttons down the back so they can learn interdependence. When they are nine, they get a bicycle. When they are eleven, it is decided for them what their future will be – what work they will do. As a reader you sense fairly early in the book that something is not quite right. Everyone gets along. If someone makes a mistake, they apologize, the apology is accepted, it's all nice and neat. But then you discover, that having electing for sameness, there is a lot they have let go of: they don't distinguish colors, babies who aren't growing are "released," once children are grown their parents go to live where adults without children live and have no further contact with the children they raised. Most poignant, when the main character learns about the word love, he goes home and asks his parents, "Do you love me?" and they respond by telling him, he's not being very precise. He needs to be more precise with his question: Is he asking if they understand him? Is he asking if they are proud of him?

I confess that there are probably days when the idea of "sameness" appeals to me. There was not fighting – it seemed peaceful. No sticking decisions to make since everything was decided for you.

Our world is not peaceful. Everyday in the paper and on television, we hear of tension between people individuals as well as between groups. People worry about what Isis will do next. We worry what might happen next between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Right after I got back from Virginia, I heard of two people who got into such a fight on an airplane about space – did she have

the right to recline her seat, because that was her space or did he had the right to prevent her seat from reclining all the way so that he'd have more space – they got so worked up, the plane had to land.

On the other hand, we've seen in recent weeks stories of people in Napa helping each other.

And we've also watched as demonstrations and talks continue in Ferguson, Missouri.

In our world, in which we do not have sameness, we sometimes see the best and sometimes we see the worst in people – often we see both – that's the way of our life.

Matthew in his Gospel is writing to the Christian community in the 1st century. In our reading today, Jesus is addressing life in community, speaking specifically to the situation when someone does something wrong. Jesus is telling those who are listening what to do in these situations and by this tells us what to do and shows us what not to do. Matthew's goal and Jesus' goal are the same – a community that is the best it can be. Jesus wants to show the disciples how to bring about restoration when there is brokenness in a community.

The process Jesus describes attempts to settle things before they become a major explosion. Jesus describes a multi-step process. The first step is to go directly to the person and speak directly to him or her alone. Hopefully, the situation will be resolved and your relationship restored.

Now if that doesn't work, there is another step, again with the goal of renewing the relationship and fixing the community. This step involves going again to the person and this time taking one or two others with you. The others can offer their perspective. They can be supportive of both parties involved in the dispute.

If that doesn't work, bring it to the larger community. Again the goal is to restore the community.

Finally if that doesn't work, Jesus tells them to treat the person like a Gentile or a tax collector. Often we've read that as "have nothing to do with them", but think how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors. Jesus always reached out to them, spent time with them. Jesus ate with them, something that angered the synagogue leaders of his time. Jesus wanted to include those who were Gentiles or tax collectors. Jesus wanted to be in relationship with them. The way I usually think of it is that Jesus was always adding another leaf to the table to include more people.

The process Jesus describes is by no ways an easy process. When someone has hurt us, it's much easier to go to our other friends and talk about the person who has hurt us. It's much harder to

go directly to them and try to work it out with them.

Years ago, when I was a parish pastor, there was a woman who was always calling the president of the congregation to tell him another bad thing that she thought I had done. One afternoon, I found her crying in the church. I went out to talk with her. She was having problems with her family. I listened to her story for quite a while. I listened and talked with her for over an hour. I would have done it whether or not it would help my relationship with her, but I was hoping that if I helped her, she might see that I wasn't as bad as she was thinking I was. She even thanked me profusely, told me she was so grateful for my time.

I was feeling better, but by 10 a.m. the next morning, she had already been on the phone to the president of the congregation to complain again about me.

I was angry. How could she thank me in the evening for the help I gave her and then complain about me to someone else the next morning.

So. . . I called her at her house and made an appointment to meet her at her home. It was just the two of us. I showed her the scripture reading. I asked her if she would try to follow Jesus' guidelines and speak directly to me when she was angry with me.

It didn't work.

By the next day, she was telling people I was trying to excommunicate her from the church. She had spoken with a Baptist pastor and he had told her what I had said to her was the first step toward excommunication.

Eventually there was a reconciliation between us, but it took a long time.

There was another woman who was also angry at me at the time. She would talk about me to others, but she would also come to church and refuse to make any sort of eye contact with me. It was disconcerting to me to see her in the pew on Sunday morning and know there would be no meaningful connection. She would even watch to see at which door I would be greeting people and she would go to another door.

On Thanksgiving Day, we were both at our congregation's community dinner. Quite frankly, I was hoping not to meet her there. I was greeting the people who were coming to the dinner and then a volunteer – not from our congregation – asked me if I knew anyone who had band-aids because – someone needed one. I went to my car to get a band-aid to give him, but before I could get it to him,

this woman who was speaking to me came out of the building and there we were two women standing in the parking lot of the community center. She looked at me: “You’re the one who has band-aids?” Me: “You’re the one who needs a band-aid.”

At that point, I had the band-aid in my hand and when I saw who the person was who needed it, I wanted to just put the band-aid back in my car. If I had been truly honest about my feelings, I would have said, “Just bleed.”

But there in that parking lot was a moment for me – it didn’t matter about her, it didn’t matter about what she’d been doing, it was about how I wanted to be – Did I want to give back the way she had been giving to me or did I want to make my decisions based on what I thought Jesus would want me to do. So there in that parking lot, the words, “Just bleed, stayed in my head and instead, I took the band-aid, opened it up and gently wrapped it around her fingers. There were not words. I had no expectations that anything would be different the following Sunday, but to my delight they were; she spoke with me – and I realized my action in the parking lot had begun a reconciliation.

When we are able to speak with each other and work things out, we are offering a credible witness as to how the Gospel can transform our life together. These kinds of actions can become a sign to the world that there is a more just and compassionate of working through things rather than by rumor or innuendo. It makes clear that the Christian life is not merely a matter of how we live as individuals but how we live in community and how each of us in that community elects to act and it’s not about what the other person may or may not do.

Over the years, I’m so glad I chose to put the band-aid on the one woman and even though nothing came of it in the moment, I’m also glad I chose to speak directly with the other woman.

Earlier, I mentioned I had been in Virginia. I’m part of an organization which accredits centers to teach people how to be chaplains. The organization had made a decision about a center which the center appealed so there were three of us named to an appeals panel. In preparation for our meeting, we read pages and pages of documents from the organization and from the appellant. After meeting with the appellant, we began to craft our decision. Another woman on the panel who is very wise, said, “How can we craft our decision so that it becomes restorative rather than continuing an adversarial relationship?” And that’s what we did. We suggested things for both sides all with the goal that the relationship might be mended.

Jesus concludes the teaching by telling us that whenever two or three are gathered in his name,

he will be with them. It's nice to think of God when we are with people we care for. What difference would it make to remember that God's spirit is **always** there when two or three come together. God's spirit is there when we encourage each other. God's spirit is there when we share with another. God's spirit is there when we are listening to someone we have wronged. God's spirit is there when we try to tell someone how we feel we've been wronged.

As I said, the intention of our text wasn't to eliminate troublesome members from congregations. When Jesus offered this teaching, it wasn't to tear apart. It was to mend, to bring together. It is about loving the other.

In another reading assigned for today, Paul in his letter to the Romans puts it this way: Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Parents know that loving their children is not always easy. Jesus' teaching about loving others and how we deal with each when we've been wronged is not easy. It's not easy to follow, but it can create a powerful caring community and God's spirit will be there and it may or may not make a difference for the other, but it makes a difference for you or me in how we decided to act and how to live.