

## **A Community of Grace**

Matthew 18: 15-20

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Over the years I have witnessed some of the worst human cruelty in airport lounges. Two years ago, I was changing planes in Denver, and when I got off my plane from Madison and arrived at the gate of my connecting flight, a businessman, dressed to the nines, was screaming at the gate agent because he would miss an important meeting in San Francisco as a result of our delayed flight. Screaming to the point that people three gates away could hear his voice. I felt sorry for the gate agent, who didn't deserve this. The delayed flight wasn't her fault. It was embarrassing. His unnecessary tirade seems to be emblematic of the times we live in.

How do we, as followers of Jesus, deal with conflict? It's a subject that most Christian congregations have real trouble with.

The psychiatrist Scott Peck once wrote that human communities often pass through four stages of development. Peck called the most common, initial stage of building community "pseudo community."<sup>1</sup> Sadly, pseudo community is often the only stage that many Christian communities will know.

In pseudo community, everyone pretends that they are already a community and that they really know each other, even though they really know little about each other. In pseudo community, people assure themselves they have only superficial differences and no reason for deep conflict.

In pseudo community, "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average," to use Garrison Keillor's famous line. Every sermon is "interesting," or at least "thought-provoking." Every paper is at least a B-plus. In pseudo community, people mind their manners no matter what they might be thinking behind a polite smile. Conversation stays general: "How've things been going lately?" "Good, busy. And you?" "Yeah, me too." I can't tell you how many times I've been guilty of offering such a response.

In pseudo community, pain and conflict are avoided at all costs, and when addressed are referenced only indirectly. What people really feel isn't shared until the "meeting after the meeting" in the parking lot. The goal of pseudo community is a bland world of pretense where no one's feelings get hurt in public.

The text before us today, Matthew 18, is Jesus' direct assault on pseudo community: "If a brother or sister sins against you, go and tell them to their face. If they won't listen, bring two others along with you as witnesses. If they still won't listen, call a meeting of the whole church..."

In this text Jesus is calling us to be more than a pseudo community. He is calling us to be a community of grace, a forgiven and forgiving people so saturated in grace that we can risk being honest with each other. For Jesus, my hurtful words or bitter resentments are not a private matter between me and God. They are a public menace to the relationships among God's people. It is not just my business; it is the business of everyone who knows me -- and that means it is worth having the occasional hard conversation about.

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<sup>1</sup> See: [http://atlc.org/members/resources/four\\_stages\\_community.html](http://atlc.org/members/resources/four_stages_community.html)

Over my lifetime I've been part of three congregations that were embroiled in messy, destructive conflict, thankfully none that I have served as a pastor. Two resulted in the departure of the pastor, and the other ended in the resignation of both co-pastors, leaving an angry congregation bitterly divided into two camps. Two of those conflicts might have been avoided if at some point early on, someone had the opportunity and the courage to say, "Let's take a time out. Can we talk?" But no one did, and the conflicts eventually mushroomed out of control.

I have a good friend in California who recently had to have a hard conversation with his mother about how the time has come for her to hand over her car keys and stop driving. It's one of the most difficult conversations that adult children can have with their parents. This case was especially difficult because the aging mother was a stubborn woman who once chased a thief through the grocery store parking lot after she saw him trying to steal another woman's purse. But after my friend had a pulse-racing, NASCAR-like ride with his mother through town, the family decided the time had come for mom to hand over the keys.

"Mom, can we talk?" he said. "We're concerned about you."

And his mother's response was all too familiar. "Stay out of my business," she shouted back in anger. Mom didn't understand that this wasn't just her business. It was the family's business, because they're going to be the ones called to an accident scene one day. And it's not just the family's business but the business of every other person behind the wheel and on the road in that community.

We take the risk of loving truthfulness because we know that such stubbornness, or selfishness, or avoidance of our physical or mental decline is more than a private matter. It is the community's business. And we should be able to take this risk in the first place because we are a people who know we are forgiven and who have pledged to forgive each other.

We often hear Matthew 18 as a spiritual "three strikes and you're out" kind of law. But Matthew 18 is less like "three strikes and you're out" and more like "you've left the playing field, and we'd like to invite you back into the game." It isn't about punishment but restoration. It is ultimately about peace, and the kind of forgiveness that makes peace possible.

Only forgiven people who have promised to forgive each other could ever be so honest with each other. The promise of forgiveness assures the future. It creates a safe space for guilty truth to be named and moved past without crippling insecurity and fear. Only people who have received forgiveness for their past mistakes can live without fear of their neighbor -- and thus genuinely love their neighbor.

And if private talk doesn't create reconciliation or persuade the wrongdoer to listen, then Jesus advises that two witnesses be brought along for a second meeting. The witnesses aren't meant to be extra muscle to lean on the stubborn one. They are not supposed to be on anyone's side but are meant to protect both parties. They are an extra set of eyes and ears to help understand what is going on -- maybe even to serve as mediators to help determine the various degrees of right and wrong. The goal is peace, right relationship -- not punishment.

And if those two or three discern that the straying one is in the wrong but refuses to make it right, the whole church is brought in to discern and compassionately appeal for restoration, which doesn't happen often enough.

In one of the churches I mentioned previously, the private conversations with the pastor had deteriorated to the point that the Session took a bold step and convened a congregational meeting, a meeting that was led by a professional facilitator. At the end of three hours of acrimony, the congregation agreed to meet again the next week to continue the conversation. At the end of that meeting the congregation decided to meet for a third time the following Sunday,

and it was only then, when all of the anger and venting and hurt had been laid on the table, that forgiveness could be offered, and the truth spoken in love. That congregation was then able to talk constructively about the next steps with its pastor. The pastor resigned, his own decision, but the congregation did not split, a monumental accomplishment.

We all know that it's not easy to start or to hear these kinds of conversations. But toward the end of Matthew 18, Jesus offers one last promise that makes it possible for us to put his words into practice: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

We often take these words as an assurance that even if there are just a few of us present in the church, Jesus is always there. But here, Jesus says these words in the context of two or three people who have met to struggle together through issues of hurtful behavior and conflict, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Jesus assures us that whenever we wrestle together with these things, whenever we struggle to determine how to graciously speak the truth in love, to be accountable, and how to practice forgiveness and move forward, Jesus will be there.

Many of us pastors say that we would like to learn more about conflict resolution, about managing conflict in the church. And that is a good thing. But I wonder at times if that is just another way of saying that we want a smooth technique to get rid of conflict altogether, that we long for a church without any disagreements.

We pastors, I think, secretly hope that a foolproof, money-back-guaranteed method will remove the hurt without pain, without hard conversations or Matthew 18. Yet Jesus implies that a church without the pain of conflict may be a church without Jesus -- because it is precisely when people are trying to wrestle with these issues that Jesus promises to be there.

What our deeply divided world desperately needs right now is not a church free of conflict but a church that models how conflict can be transformed into peace. I pray that Westminster can be that kind of community of grace.

Amen.