**Matthew 18:15-20** September 20, 2020

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*Matthew 18:15[Jesus said,] “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ 17If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*

*18“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”*

**Why Should I Be Glad When Someone Confronts Me?**

Dear Friends in Christ,

It is one of the most unpleasant things there is, and it was happening to me. In started nicely enough. He said, “How you doin’, Pastor?” But I could tell it wasn’t just an ordinary “How you doin’?” He was a little bit fidgety, and he wasn’t looking at me, but past me—or was it at the ground?—and clearly had something on his mind other than how my day had been. And then he said it, “Pastor, I don’t see how you could… after I had just…” I mean, it was Sunday morning. Why is he bringing this up on a Sunday morning? I felt under attack.

What about you? When someone comes up to you and confronts you at an unexpected moment, how do you feel?

For many or most of us, verbal confrontation is perhaps the most visceral moment of our ordinary lives. Sure, we can imagine being in a live fire-fight, or being assaulted by a robber, but for most these things happen but a handful of times in an entire life—if at all! Being confronted with our faults is about the toughest moment we face. Survival instincts kick in. Fight or flight reactions start. Mentally, internally, we race to react. We start thinking about how we were right and this person being unreasonable. Or even if we weren’t exactly right, at least we’re not like them and all their faults! Who are they to throw rocks? As the seconds and then minutes pass, we fortify our position, all the while looking for weaknesses in their words and rationale. Then we go on the offensive and take them down.

That is your and my natural reaction to confrontation. If not exactly this way, then something like it.

In our reading, Jesus talks about confronting sin. And we are going to talk about that. But today, I would like us, at least for the moment, to take the reverse side of this confrontation. Not because Jesus is wrong. That can never be. But because perhaps, by putting ourselves in the other seat, not of the confronter, but the seat of the one being confronted, maybe we can gain an insight into what Jesus is telling us to do.

When Jesus tells *us* to confront someone with *their* sin, we put ourselves in the driver’s seat. And that is good, because Jesus is telling us the right way to act when we are sinned against. But here is something else that happens: When we only think about how *we* should confront people when *they* sin against *us*, we naturally assume that we are right. We can easily forget that roughly ½ of the time we are the ones who need to be confronted!

So in light of what Jesus teaches us today, I want you to ask yourself a question that I must ask myself:

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In order to answer that, let’s look at the first two sentences of Jesus’ powerful teaching session (and here I would encourage you to take a look at your bulletin or your Bible to follow along). Verse 15: ***“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”*** Let’s break that down, phrase by phrase.

Jesus starts by saying, ***“If your brother…”*** Who is “my brother”? That’s not the same question as “Who is my neighbor?” My neighbor, as Jesus pointed out in that parable of the Good Samaritan, is every single living human being on this planet. ***“My brother”*** is someone different. As usual in the New Testament, when Jesus says, ***“…your brother…”*** he is talking about your fellow believer. [And of course, “brother” is inclusive of both “sisters” and “brothers” in Christ.] Jesus is talking about things that happen between spiritual siblings, among us, within the Christian church.

On to the next word: ***“If your brother sins…”*** If he does what? If he ***“sins.”*** We are not talking about personality quirks that we all have in one way or another: an annoying laugh, an overly familiar approach, a stand-offish manner, or whatever. We can ignore or deal with those things as we see fit in Christian love. That’s not what Jesus is talking about. Jesus is talking about sin. Stuff that incurs guilt before God. Sin is the stuff that required Christ Jesus to go to the cross and to die for us. He is talking about the insult, the neglect, the physical harm, the dishonesty, the cheating, the public humiliation. God hates these things, especially when they happen among brothers. God says that these things need to be dealt with.

The next words, ***“against you.”*** ***“If your brother sins against you…”*** Jesus is specifically talking about person-to-person sin. That’s not to say public immorality and ungodliness aren’t a concern to God. It’s just not what Jesus is talking about here. Jesus is saying, “When *you* have been sinned against, when *you* have been the victim of a fellow Christian’s selfishness or neglect or dishonesty, this is what you should do.”

What should we do? ***“Go and show him his fault.”*** There is another Bible passage that sometimes gets kicked around when we are wronged. You know the one I am talking about. People sometimes say that we should just *“turn the other cheek.”* That’s in the Bible isn’t it? We are just supposed to put up and shut up right? No. Without spending much time on that Bible passage from Matthew chapter 5, do you know who that Bible passage *“turning the other cheek”* is talking about? It is talking about enemies. *This* passage is talking about your Christians brothers and sisters, remember? We ought to expect unbelieving enemies to do us wrong—*“turn the other cheek”—*but not fellow Christians.

Think of it this way: I imagine there is hardly anything sadder for a parent than to see their own children at each other’s necks. And so Jesus does not tell us to *“turn the other cheek”* to fellow Christians, but rather ***“Go and show him his fault.”*** God does not want people who are Christians to victimize other Christians and get away with it. For a long list of reasons, sin among God’s people needs to be confronted, and Jesus says so! So Jesus tells us, his children, to talk to our brother or sister in the faith when they have wronged us.

But then he adds this: ***“just between the two of you.”*** Confrontation, yes. A scene, no. Now if they are going to get stubborn about it, we may eventually have to bring other people into the picture, as verses 16 and 17 tell us. But that is not where we start. We start with just the two of us. We don’t go around publicizing it: “Did you see that? Did you see what he did to me?” Jesus doesn’t want that. Keep the matter private. Maybe you misunderstood the other person. Maybe they didn’t realize what they did. Maybe they know they did and are feeling bad about it. Whatever is going on, God wants this to stay between just the two of you.

But the most important reason for keeping it just between the two of you for the time being is highlighted in the next sentence. ***“If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”*** The goal of every confrontation is to win your brother, your sister back to Jesus. Confrontation isn’t about teaching people better manners. This isn’t about putting them in their place or proving that I am right. This isn’t about me and how I have been disadvantaged or victimized. This is primarily a genuine concern for that person’s eternal well-being. They have sinned, and that sin has the ability to work great evil in their life. We want to win them over, yes, partly so that they don’t sin against us in the future (God doesn’t want you sinned against by your fellow Christian), but even more importantly so that your brother or sister can be restored to their Savior.

That’s why, at least at the beginning, we keep the confrontation just between the two of us. Nothing is more counter-productive to ***“winning your brother over”*** than publicizing their fault.

At just this point I can’t help but remember a story a pastor once told me. A Christian man, as with many church going Christian men, was called upon to serve as an usher at his church from time to time. Every time he would usher, his hands were untidy. His hands would have this general griminess to them. There often would be black junk under his fingernails, sometimes all ten of them. After a while a woman of the church made it known that she felt it a disrespect to God that he would hand the offering plate around with those filthy hands. He needed to clean up his act, or at least his hands. When the man heard about the complaint, he left. He was never seen in that church again. ——He was an auto mechanic. Not to say he was entirely right, but he was an auto mechanic.

You know stories like that, don’t you.

Go, talk about it with the person. Just the two of you. If they have something to repent of, may they repent. Or if, as has happened to me more than once, if it is a misunderstanding, may it be politely resolved.

We have looked at verse 15 in some detail because every single phrase tells us a story of what we should do when we have been sinned against—or feel that we have been sinned against. Each phrase becomes all the more important when we remember that Jesus was *not* a procedure sort of guy. Jesus wasn’t one to set up checklists and catalogues of rules. Here, more than any other time that I can think of (now, I could be forgetting something here) but more than anywhere else in his teachings, Jesus plots out a point to point flow chart of what we are supposed to do. And we should be asking ourselves, “Why does Jesus do something here that he almost never does otherwise?” Why? Because in no place are there more chances for things to go wrong, for the peace of the body of Christ to be broken, than when we confront one another. We know this is why people leave the church. Listen, and take in again Jesus directions as I read slowly verse 15, ***“If your brother\*\*\*sins\*\*\*against you,\*\*\*go and show him his fault,\*\*\*just between the two of you.\*\*\*If he listens to you,\*\*\*you have won your brother over.”***

Now there is lots more to be said in the rest of this reading. It’s worth another sermon—maybe next time. But now I have a different perspective when out of the blue someone comes up to me and says, “How you doin’, Pastor?” but I can tell it isn’t just an ordinary “How you doin’?” He is a little bit fidgety, and isn’t looking at me, but past me—or is it at the ground?—and clearly has something else on his mind than how my day has been. Then he says, “Pastor, I don’t see how you could… after I had just…”

And you know what I feel? I am glad that he has summoned up the courage to confront me. I am glad that he counts me a brother in Christ, that he is concerned enough about sin to do something about it. I am glad that he didn’t take what I did and treat it like it didn’t matter because it did. I am glad that he didn’t turn the wrong I had done and swept it under the carpet and let it grow into a grudge that poisoned his relationship with God and me. I’m glad he didn’t turn it into a reason to gossip, but instead was concerned enough about me to talk to me about something that wasn’t right between me and him and God.

And there is one more reason to be glad that he confronted me: because Jesus told him to. Yes, that Sunday morning Jesus himself said to that brother in the faith, ***“If you brother sins against you, go and show him his fault just between the two of you.”*** And that’s just what he did, and I’m glad. Amen.