“We’re not that nice”

Matthew 18:15-22

September 10, 2017

Worship in the Park

At my previous church, we would always tease our associate pastor Dolly before a Sunday that she would preach. Our organist John would always say, “What movie or book are you going to preach about this week Dolly?” I think Dolly has rubbed off on me a little bit as last week I began the sermon talking about the movie, “What’s Eating Gilbert Grape”. This week I will begin the sermon talking about the show, “The Good Wife.” The Good Wife is about a lawyer who goes back to work after being a stay at home wife for years of the state’s attorney in Chicago. Her husband had cheated on her, and she decides to stay with him, but she joins a law firm. One episode matches up perfectly with our Matthew reading for this week. This episode centers around an owner/CEO of a company that is like Monsanto. In the same town that the CEO lives, there is a farmer. This farmer had been taking his seeds from the previous year’s harvest and using those seeds to plant for the next year. Well that is illegal. Now a days in farming, you must buy the seeds from a supplier because often they are patented. Most of these seeds are Genetically modified to be resistant to Round Up. This is so you can spray the crops with round up to kill all the weeds that grow around your crop. The company finds out that the farmer did not buy a batch of new seeds and decides to sue the farmer. The plaintiff and defendant know each other and were both Christians. Instead of going to court, they decide to use this pastor as a mediator. This pastor has something called the Matthew 18 process. Where you confront the person who sins against you in front of this pastor. The defendant and the plaintiff bring a group of lawyers along with them. Many of these lawyers start using scripture to defend each of their sides. They get into huge arguments with each other and the pastor. After awhile, you can see that both the defendant and plaintiff become totally uninterested in all the arguing going on around them. You eventually see them whispering to each other. One of them yells, stop! We have come to an agreement on their own. The lawyers were not needed and they came to an agreement that worked for both of them. It was so interesting to see a show on CBS that treated scripture with such seriousness.

Today is our kickoff Sunday for the year. Where we get all fired up for church. Especially after a lot of us have been on our vacations for this summer. School is back in full swing. We have a new pastor! So this is the beginning of my first new church year with all of you. What an exciting time this is for all of us. A great time for me to figure out how all of you operate. I am still trying to figure out who does what. And who could be asked to do something new. That is one really fun part of starting out in a new call. I get to sit back, and see what happens. Obviously, I won’t be just sitting around doing nothing, but I am just trying to get the lay of the land before trying to change things. Things are pretty good now, but maybe they won’t always be. This is where this scripture can really speak to us.

Jesus had finished up with his ministry in Galilee. Last week we heard about how Jesus was to die. What kind of messiah he was to be. The disciples were understandably surprised and angry. How could our teacher, leader and Son of the Living God be executed by the state? And Peter made his objection known. That was a very upsetting and crucial scene in the gospel. In the chapter after our reading for today, Jesus will make the trek to his death in Jerusalem. So right now, we are in that in-between time. Which may make this passage seem kind of trivial. Jesus is teaching about how the church is to behave. So for now, Jesus is at home sounding like Dear Abby. Here are his instructions. “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” It sounds so easy in theory. Definitely not in practice. This is church after all. There shouldn’t be any conflict. Because we are all so Godly and everything goes so well right? We all know that is not the case. As with any family or organization we are going to have conflict with one another. This idea was the most helpful to me in seminary. We call this family systems theory. The church also fits into this theory. The family is an emotional unit and each of us are connected to each other. Families profoundly effect their members’ thoughts, feelings, and actions so that it may seem as if people are living under the same emotional skin. People solicit other’s attention, approval, and support. Then we react to each other’s needs, expectations and upsets. This connectedness and reactivity make the functioning of family members interdependent. A change in one person’s functioning is always followed by a reaction in others. When anxiety goes up in a family it spreads out through the others. Anxiety will try to be absorbed by others. Seems like Jesus had an idea about this theory some two thousand years ago.

So meeting one on one with the person that sinned against you is a good first step. Often we try and wrangle in a trusted person to help right away. This is what we call triangulation. If there is one of you that has sinned against me, maybe I go home and complain to my wife. Or my kids. At least with the girls they will only smile back and agree with my side of the situation. But if I go home and complain to my wife about one of you, then she is the outsider in this situation. I can dump all of my anxiety on her and then we can team up on the offender. Not a good idea. But we know how nerve racking it is to approach the person who hurt us. We want support. Will that person listen to us? Will they even see what they have done? After all it is the person who hurt who is approaching the hurter. Not the other way around where that person is admitted where they sinned.

But if that person does not listen, then we are to take one or two trusted people along with us. If that person doesn’t listen to your little group, then the claim is to be brought forward to the entire church. If that doesn’t work then we are to treat them as a gentile or a tax collector. Which sounds very odd. Treat that insider now as an outsider. Especially when much of the gospel message is to be inclusive of the outsider. But there has to be boundaries. There has to be discipline.

This scripture more than anything is about our relationships. Relationships in our lives are so strange. They are integral to who we are. They are never perfect. We learn as young children how we are to relate properly with our family. Often those relationships don’t start off on the right foot. We may gravitate to one parent over another. One parent may enjoy the company of a child over the other child. Our lives are just very complicated. As we grow up so many new people come into our lives. We only have so much time to relate with one another. Maybe one side of the family gets more visits for holidays than the other. That can breed conflict. I can think of my family. My extended family is very close and very involved with one another. Outside of Sara’s nuclear family, they are not very close or involved with each other. That can breed resentment. It is a tight line to walk. One side of the family seems to get more attention than the other, just because we get along with each other better. So what can we do?

Sometimes our relationships just dwindle away. We have no idea what we have done to each other. Then we may not speak for years. Then maybe that friend will call up after awhile and say sorry I haven’t talked to you in a long time. But this is what you have done to me. And you are completely caught off guard. Then maybe a grudge against that person will form. I didn’t do anything wrong we may say. Then we may cut them off, because it is easier on our emotions.

We can do this with family. Maybe you have a family member you have cut off because of their behavior. Sometimes we do need to cut them off because of destructive behavior. After all the attempts at reconciliation this may be necessary for our well being. But it is so hard, and we look to form relationships elsewhere to replace them. We pressure the others that we are close to, to operate like the person that was cut off. When they fail to meet those expectations, it creates more tension in the system.

The work of reconciliation is not easy. It is not easy in our families and not easy in our churches. This may seem like a step by step list out of Matthew’s gospel. But it is not. It is just the beginning of a conversation. When we are sinned against, it is so easy to go and complain about it to someone else. Or to just shrug it off and keep on going with our lives. But it festers. It sticks with us. It doesn’t go away. Then that problem with hang around in our families, our work and our church. That is why we need to confront conflict and not just run away from it.

That is what makes being a pastor so interesting. We come into a church with little knowledge of how things exactly work. What are the hurts that are lingering? Who is in charge, officially or unofficially. Who has been left out? It will take a long time to figure that out. I also need to be impartial. I need to try and spend time with each of you as equally as possible. That is so tough. Some people need a lot of care and some don’t. I can spend all sorts of time with one person and that will never be enough. For some a simple phone call will mean the world to them. How odd.

At a lunch with several colleagues a pastor said a careless word about another pastor. After returning from lunch another of the lunch bunch came to his office and confronted him. His coming to see the offender was an act of Christian maturity. He risked a bad response because he cared enough to push to more careful speech. Conflict was used to build up and not tear down. He could of went to someone else and complained about the bad words. He spoke truth directly to the offender and built up the kingdom. Such a small thing with such a big effect. What are the small things that got people in the midst of this conflict anyway? How can conflict be resolved at the smallest possible level? How can we use it as a chance to build up instead of tear down?

This passage really calls us to think small. To confront the small things along with the big. Stopping the small conflicts will stop conflict from festering and becoming larger. Can we do that as a church? Sometimes there will be conflict that will cause people to leave. Or a conflict that is so damaging that we need to kick someone out. Say sexual misconduct or something as horrendous. We would have to do that to keep our church safe. We can’t be that nice. People do need to be held accountable.

We will be celebrating shortly the sacrament of the Lord’s supper. Where no matter the conflicts that are between us or the animosity we have, it will be put aside. Where all can come to the table and be served. It gives us a great pause. To reflect on why we are here together. To reflect on the sacrifice that Jesus made for us. To proclaim Christ’s saving death until he comes again. This is a powerful time. When we are done celebrating, life will keep happening around us. Will we have the courage to confront the little things? Can we break the mold of being such nice Christians? Amen.

**Matthew 18:15-22**

**Reproving Another Who Sins**

15 ‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.18Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’