

Family Matters

This Sunday Jesus intensifies his hard and challenging teachings to help us understand the demands placed on those who would follow him. He takes on trust, conflict and reconciliation in families of faith. Issues of trust lie at the heart of all significant relationships. And trustworthiness in a family of faith, well that is what makes so much of God's grace and joy possible. So Jesus takes us to school in what it means to be truly trustworthy and whole as a believing community. He leads us into the tender and challenging work of creating the opportunities for restoration and reconciliation when there is an issue of injury or dispute among members of a faith community: "Jesus said, 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.'" I think we all know that sometimes our first instinct in a conflict situation like this is often to go and tell anyone but the person with whom we are in contention that we have been offended. We tend to act out our conflict in some other unhealthy way. And then he goes on: "If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But 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. If 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 an outsider. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." I think that these instructions are even potentially more difficult than the first. Jesus' community was made up of tight-knit groups who were all interdependent economically and socially; we do not have a modern equivalent. Most of the churches in our experience are made up of several people that have what my grandmother used to call a "nodding acquaintance." This is where we know each other from moving through some of the same places, but the true breadth and depth of our relationship is encompassed in offering a brief nod when we pass on the street. In the Outline of the Faith in our Book of Common Prayer we read the question: "What is the mission of the Church?" And the Answer is: "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ". In fact, our reconciliation with one another as members of the same family of faith in matters of conflict is just as much our mission as our attempt to reconcile the world to Christ. It is just as much our mission because we cannot do for the world what we cannot do for and among ourselves. North American Christianity is over-laden with individualism. Over the centuries we of European decent have altered the original Middle Eastern cultural expression of Christianity to conform to our individualistic values and practices. We hear Jesus' words through this filter as though individualism is one of Jesus' foundational truths. Church historian Diana Butler Bass and others have indicated that the only place mainline American Christianity is growing is in multi-cultural churches—churches that come together out of communal cultures with a communally based understanding of faith. Okay, I will conclude my "Christ in Culture" dissertation and move on. As Tom Long says, "Church people, no matter how committed, are still people, and stormy weather is always a possible forecast!" And if we've been paying attention to all of Paul's letters that we read Sunday by Sunday we know that many of them contain stern admonishments about people behaving badly at church. Why is this so? Interestingly, many studies have shown that people will exhibit more negative behaviors in their church community than in their professional or personal lives. One theory is that people do not expect to be challenged for their negative behaviors in church, and often this is revealed to be true; we can feel very reticent and embarrassed to confront negative behaviors in our worshipping communities and often for the reasons I've already spoken of. But Jesus shows no such reticence. Both Jesus and Paul are clear that sustained negative behaviors by a member or members of a faith community can bring it to its knees and consume its life. But in their response and guidance as to how we confront such problems we see that what is most required in these situations is the courage to be truth-tellers. To "tell the truth in love" as we hear it put these days is all about telling difficult truths with the specific goal of reconciliation. Which brings me to what I think is another very interesting thing about what Jesus is saying today about life in a family of faith: Jesus naturally assumes that there will be conflict in the

family. Conflict is not necessarily something to be avoided, what is to be avoided is unhealthy conflict as described above. In a healthy family of faith, when the family is working “right” we learn and grow in trust and love as a result of conflict. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “A healthy family (of faith) has a way of smoothing our rough edges by making us rub up against each other, like tumbling pebbles in a jar.” She reminds us that learning to take the risk of being truly committed to one another in this way is how we learn we can’t have everything our own way. She says, “We learn to compromise, giving up some of the things we want so that other people can have some of the things they want. And while it is never easy, learning this give-and-take is part of learning how to be fully human.”

So now we find ourselves at what is probably the most shocking point in this gospel. If the offender ultimately refuses to listen, they are in effect cast out of the community, in harsher religious terms, excommunicated. How do we reconcile these painful words with Jesus’ teaching that we are to love our enemies and that we are to do unto others as we would have them do to us? It is hard for us to comprehend but the fact is that Jesus’ sees excommunication as an act of radical love not only for the community, but also for the individual who refuses reconciliation. This final act is meant to help the person who will not be reconciled to understand that he or she has become one of those stumbling blocks we heard about last week. Anyone who refuses reconciliation greatly impairs the Body of Christ. Such a radical act is meant to hopefully break the cycle of carrying our resentments like a cancer because it is only the unwillingness to be reconciled that prevents restoration. An important note is that his difficult teaching is held gently between Jesus’ dogged determination to leave the 99 that are safe to seek out and find that one that is lost and then a treatise on our participation in the endless cycle of God’s forgiveness. In the end you see, the gospel calls us to focus not on our brokenness, but on God’s love. And we are to be zealous in creating a family of truth-tellers and reconcilers, a family so strong that we learn and grow through healthy conflict. The litany we shared at our Celebration last week captures a lovely way to keep God’s Love at the center: I pray for you, you pray for me, I need you, We need each other. I will not harm you with words from my mouth I need you We need each other.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+