

September 6, 2020
Maricopa Lutheran Church
14th Sunday of Pentecost, Matthew 18:15-20

How often have you seen bitter family feuds? Not the minor aggravations that we usually tolerate, but rather deep divisions that replace love with hostility. The tragedy of divorce happens not just between spouses, but also among other family members.

As Jesus recognized in today's Gospel, this also can happen in the family of God. So, our Lord gives us a plan for reconciliation. This plan involves both repenting and forgiving. It also directs how we deal with those who persist in dangerous sins. As we take a brief look at his tough plan for a tough problem, maybe some particular relationships will come to your mind.

Jesus says, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out that person's fault, when the two of you are alone." Not complaining to other people, not shaming the person on social media.

Jesus tells us to help somebody who made a mistake to correct a mistake, with as little embarrassment as possible. These hard conversations are about hope, hope that relationships will be healed. As much as we might want to avoid it, isn't this good to do sooner rather than later, before more damage is done?

If step one doesn't solve the problem, Jesus told us to bring in some wise believers. The purpose is to help us, the other person, or both to remedy a wrong and to reconcile. If that fails to correct a seriously dangerous sin, then the whole church is to try to persuade the wrongdoer. If even that fails, Jesus said that this person's relationship with the church is broken, a break that is reflected in heaven.

As usual, Jesus balanced tender love and tough love. He called sinners to repent and to be forgiven. He also protected his family of faith. For Jesus died to save us sinners from our sins, not to indulge the sins that keep harming both us and our fellow believers.

So far, Jesus sounds a lot like a wise church consultant or family therapist, but isn't he so much more than that? Through his life, his death, his resurrection, and the gift of his Holy Spirit, Jesus began to renew humanity here and now, a process that obviously has a long way to go.

In some ways, Jesus has been doing this renewal through flawed believers like us, however incompletely. In other ways, he's been overcoming our resistance. Regardless, when Jesus comes again, he'll raise the dead, make all things new, and finish the job.

In his spiritual warfare against the forces of evil and death, our God baptizes us to be his allies, and he calls his allies to cooperate with him and with each other. That's part of why he gives us his Word and Sacraments, his Spirit, and our fellow believers. These precious gifts can empower us to act for reconciliation in ways that we cannot do on our own, so that we all serve together on God's side.

So, when we're stuck again in troubled relationships, we can turn to Jesus for guidance and inspiration, so the same mercy that saves us can flow through us to the people in our lives, so God's forgiveness can empower our forgiveness, and so God's love for all people can move through our actual deeds of love for the particular people in our lives.

Far more than we may realize, how we Christians deal with other people is about us and is about far more than just us. It's also about the power of divine grace flowing through how we act in the difficult relationships in our lives.

God is changing us and God is using that change to transform our part of his world, so that his kingdom may come in some small way through us, as the forgiveness we receive inspires the forgiveness we give, and this forgiveness is reflected in heaven.

Just think, what would it be like if we Christians really were well known as people who actually reconcile our family conflicts? What a contrast to the warring ways of our world. What a wonderful way to lead people to Jesus. What better place to begin than with our repenting and forgiving? For whether we know it or not, our daily repentance and forgiveness send Gospel vibrations to all around us.

The more we are in tune with our Lord, then the more he guides how we reach out to those we think have wronged us. Then we speak what we think is true in a spirit of humble love rather than wounded self-righteousness. We do this knowing that our understanding is incomplete and that our motivations are mixed. Then we act to solve problems rather than to defeat opponents. For it's possible for us to be true to our convictions, while respecting and even loving those whose beliefs are very different from ours.

Again and again, Jesus links our relationships with each other and our relationships with our God. The more that we love the God who loves us so very much, then the more that we're empowered to love others as well, whether we particularly like them or not. For the love of Christ is more than a feeling. It's action.

Most of all, then the love of God can flow more freely through us and our through relationships for renewing our little corner of time and space, one small step at a time, until Jesus come again and makes all things new.

Amen

Pastor Carl A. Jensen, livingsystemsconsult@gmail.com