

Thank you, for your inconvenience the last two weeks, of my being on vacation. The double edged sword of being on vacation, is that being away you are able to reflect objectively on what routinely we do; on the other side, away from routine and the witness of 2 or 3 others, individual perspectives may prove different from when in community.

One of the things I got in touch with is that this church did really hard work before I ever arrived. Through hardship, faith and struggle our Church had come to a powerful Mission Statement of: "Our making Christ known through Reconciliation, communicating respect and love to all people." Then in our first 6 months COVID happened! Life happened! While we implicitly lived this Mission, we worked at survival/care for one another. During my time away, several reposted an article from Facebook, that directly applies to "Jesus Rule" in Matthew 18. For both reasons, I wanted to begin by restating that article for us all:

There are 2 men who sometimes hold hands in worship. Some have said the pastors should say something. There is a man who sneaks in after worship begins and leaves before it's over. Those near him complain that he smells of beer and smoke and sweat. Some have said the pastors should say something.

Then there is the mother of kids, who people complain the kids eat all the cookies, like they have not been fed. Some have said the pastors should say something.

Finally there is the whore sitting among the faithful. She comes all painted and perfumed and everybody knows what she is. Some have said the pastors should say something.

What the pastors need to say to all, for We are all the same, is this:

Welcome Church to the worship of God!

This is a place of love and hope and safety and forgiveness.

We will be food for the hungry, an oasis of living water for those who thirst.

We are so glad you are here. You are invited. You are loved. Come in – we have been waiting for you. We are the church. Welcome! May we blow the dust of religion out of our souls, choosing affection and empathy instead. May our Words and Actions and Reactions become a Sanctuary for all. Maybe

those are not exactly the people worshipping beside us, but the truth is that all of us have Issues! There are those whose husband or wife just died. There are those who were scammed by identity theft. Some have not seen or heard from family in years. Some of us live with shame. Nearly all of us have a medical condition, some who have circumstances that could lead to death, some who are having trouble remembering, some who have trouble thinking clearly, some who need to give up driving. All are Church!

After COVID, we pick up with the same Mission "To Make Christ Known through Reconciliation, Communicating Respect and Love to All." But in 3 yrs of isolation, real relationships have to start anew.

45 years ago the Psychiatrist Scott Peck was well known for his books: *The Road Less Traveled* and *The Different Drum*. In these, Peck described that whenever strangers come together, they try to form community. However, what strangers in Community first create is PSEUDO-COMMUNITY. The essential dynamic of Pseudo-community is conflict avoidance: Where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average. Members are extremely pleasant, wanting to be loving, but withholding truths about themselves and their feelings in order to be accepted and to avoid confrontation. Individual differences are minimized, unacknowledged, ignored, so that the group can appear to function; while truth, honesty, intimacy, individualism, pain and suffering are crushed.

When conflict can no longer be avoided Communities becomes CHAOS, as individual differences surface. Well-intentioned, sometimes misguided souls attempt to fix, to heal, to control and dominate, beginning conversations with "CAN WE TALK?" when what we really mean is "LET ME TELL YOU SOMETHING!" Maybe this is that they need therapy, or some level of assistance. From experience the number of times

a person attempts recovery is between 0 and 100, with nearly everyone needing at least 2 attempts, the most common being 5 times, before they do so because they needed to do so, not because someone else told them they did. What has become a routine part of American CHAOS is assuming everyone has to agree or that we can legislate social norms.

Only after Communities hit rock bottom, can we arrive at the hardest stage in development, which is EMPTINESS. This is where we recognize both that we do not have another person's answers, we cannot control their lives for them; THEREFORE we begin to drop our barriers. When we are real with one another, we can begin to share our own brokenness, defeats, failures, fears and shame, rather than "acting as if we have it all together" and we begin to speak honestly to each other and to listen.

Matthew 18 is not Jesus' Book of Discipline. What Jesus was saying is that when you have a problem with someone, be that a sibling by birth, or in the family of the church, rather than avoiding issues or telling them what they should do; that we go to one another privately and look one another eye to eye, to share our relationship and our concern for our differences. The early Methodists made it a point to practice this. Wesley admonished members of Religious Societies: Not to talk about their leaders, or one another, behind their backs but to share their concerns and complaints directly face to face.

The point of bringing other persons along is not to TRIANGULATE, but truly to have WITNESSES who hold us both accountable to being in relationship. Sometimes, we cannot see the 2x4 in our own eye when we are trying to help others, and often times we do not recognize when we are not fair with one another.

The point of taking this before the Church is realization that when there is brokenness between us, it effects our Communion, the whole body of Christ. For Jesus, the brokenness of sin is not a private thing between me and GOD. We are the Body of Christ, and what effects us, effects us all. This why when Pastor Diane's Parents each passed, as did my wife's Mother, we shared this openly. So why not when there are concerns weighing us down or causing brokenness?

The conclusion of verse 17 is an accurate translation, but the point is not 3 Strikes and you are Out, instead recognize the other is leaving your Ballfield and you need to go get them. Our Core Principle is RECONCILIATION: Forgiveness & UNITY based on God's Love, rather than Exclusion based on the other having done wrong or believed differently. The Presbyterians did something unique about 8 years ago. We recognized that both sides in the Church had tried to legislate against the other. So we threw away the Rule Book, deciding in the first place that we were not going to make social decisions in the ABSTRACT, but only about real believers in conflict. Second, that while anything is possible, we trust people to listen to each other, at times to agree to disagree, and to determine what is right for ourselves in our own congregation. Calvinists were known for an emphasis on Sin & Forgiveness, but John Calvin had a unique understanding of sin. SIN IS ANYTHINGS WHICH CAUSES YOU SEPARATION/BROKENNESS FROM GOD!

It is ironic, perhaps also intentional, that Matthew has Jesus offer this teaching immediately after the Parable of LEAVING THE 99 to Seek the 1 LOST SHEEP and immediately before Peter asking do I have to forgive my brother as many as 7 times. The point is, if you have lost a sheep, you would not give up after the first try, so why do we give up on our brother when there is conflict or disagreement?

Notice that Jesus follows this with naming the POWER OF AGREEMENT, saying that anything that is agreed upon by two on Earth will be done for them in Heaven. THIS IS A PROMISE! Even more, Jesus emphasizes that whenever two or more are gathered in my name, Jesus is present. Even when 2 or 3 are gathered in his name in DISAGREEMENT, especially when they disagree, Jesus is there. Essentially, Jesus is saying: I trust you! I trust you as a community to decide together when to bind and when to forgive.