

Blessed are the Relationship Menders

(Text: Matthew 18:15-20)

One of the most important works a Christian is called to practice in his or her daily life is the rebuilding of relationships. Few things would make us pray more or do more to incorporate what the Bible says into the fabric of our lives than taking on the task of rebuilding a broken relationship. Few things would give our characters more integrity or purpose than rebuilding a broken relationship. Few things would make us more courageous, more loving, or more fair than rebuilding a broken relationship. Furthermore, when people rebuild broken relationships they learn so much about love and forgiveness and lose so much of their arrogance and self-righteousness and hardness of heart.

The church is meant to be the school in which we learn the art of rebuilding relationships. In the passage from Matthew 18 Jesus gives us a tutorial on this art.

Please look at Matthew 18:19: “Again, I truly tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” Now often this verse is understood to be about prayer. However, when you see the verse in the context of the passage, I think Jesus means for this verse to be understood in relation to the rebuilding of relationships. After believers have come to an understanding of what caused the division and have resolved it, Jesus says that he is present with them in a particular way. Conversely, when two believers are at odds with each other, they are not being Christ to each other because at the heart of the work of Jesus is reconciliation.

In 2 Corinthians 5: 18 St. Paul underscores this when he writes: “Anyone who is united with the Messiah Jesus gets a fresh start, is created new. All this comes from God who settled the relationship between us and him; and then called us to settle our relationships with each other.”

Can you think of any relationships where you need to be doing some rebuilding? Relationships where some things need to be discussed and settled? The main point I want to make today is that when we have the courage to work on mending a broken relationship Jesus will be present with us.

So let's consider for a moment three unhealthy ways in which we often deal with fractured relationships. One way is to harbour resentment. We believe another person has hurt us by their word or actions but rather than try to broach the hurt we keep it to ourselves and it turns into resentment. The person whom we believe has hurt us is kept in the dark as we perhaps grow in avoiding them because we will not address the problem. Here there can be no mending because there is avoidance whereby we give the impression that everything is okay when it isn't.

A second unhealthy way in which we deal with broken relationships is by failing to admit when we have done wrong. How hard it can be for us to admit when we have hurt another person. How hard it can be for us to address the grudge another may have against us. And because of this we will often avoid those whom we think are harbouring a grudge against us because we want to avoid the conflict that might ensue.

A third unhealthy way in which we deal with broken relationships is by becoming defensive and we justify ourselves when another person does approach us to talk about how we have hurt them. When this happens we are unable to listen carefully to what they are saying and so we shut them out.

And yet Jesus teaches that avoidance, denial and defensiveness do not lead to the mending of relationships. So instead we are to do the following.

At verse 15 we read: "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. As you probably know, the New Testament was written originally in Greek. The NRSV, at this point, does a poor job of translating the Greek. It says, "If another member of the church sins," but that isn't what Jesus said. Jesus said, "If sou adelphos sins...." Sou adelphos doesn't mean "another member of the church." It means "your brother." In other words, Jesus really said, "If your brother sins...."

That is significant. We Christians are not just members of the same club -- we are members of the same family. Ephesians 2:19 says that we are "members of the household of God." That makes us brothers and sisters. It wouldn't hurt us to recover that New Testament language, because it reminds us that we are to have special reason to love one another. We are FAMILY! That person sitting in the pew in front of you is your brother or sister. That person sitting across the aisle -- the one that you don't like very well -- is your brother or sister. As is the person who is frustrating you or

you are having difficulty understanding at present.

To be a disciple is not an individualistic relationship to Christ, but life together. This principle is to set us apart from the secular world. "In contrast to the attitudes of the prevailing culture

('If somebody hassles you, forget them...), relationships are of precious and enduring value in the church. When a relationship is broken, it is worth going back over and over to work toward reconciliation."

In this passage Jesus shows us how we are to do this.

1. If we feel that someone has wronged us we are to put it into words. The worst thing we can do about a wrong is to brood over it. It can poison the whole mind and life, until we can think of nothing but our sense of personal injury.

2. Second if we believe someone has wronged us we should go and see them personally and privately. This is why Jesus says at verse 17 "go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If your brother or sister listens you have regained that one." We want to address the wrong so that the relationship can be mended instead of it leading to further division. Added to Jesus' words at this point we need to hear what St. Paul writes in Galatians 6.1: "if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of meekness"

Much can be said about the word meekness but for our purposes this morning I want you to understand that meekness is the opposite of self-assertiveness and self-interest. When we are able to restore someone in such a way we are not speaking out of the sense of injury done to us. An attitude that says "I need to be proven right." Rather the situation is being addressed so that the relationship can be restored.

Unless done in a spirit of meekness the confrontation is likely to do more harm than good -- to become another occasion for sin. It is not easy to love someone when we believe they have offended us. Therefore this is a situation where we must pray for grace before beginning the intervention. We cannot expect to deal effectively with the offender until we have first invited God to deal with us. This too requires meekness. Just as we would expect a surgeon to study X-rays in preparation for a difficult surgery, so we have a responsibility to plan this intervention carefully and to invite the

Spirit's help. It will not do to go off half-cocked.

Proverbs 15.1: captures this point so well. There we read: A gentle response defuses anger, but a sharp tongue kindles a temper-fire.

3. As we are approached by someone who believes we have wronged them listen carefully to what they are saying without interruption. Don't try to finish their sentences for them but truly listen as you seek to understand what they are saying to you. If the confrontation has been done in a gentle way and the one receiving correction accepts what has been said then there will be agreement and what Jesus says in verse 19 about him being present can lead to a deepening of the relationship.

4. However, if a private and personal meeting fails in its purpose, then we should take some wise person or persons with us. The witnesses are not to be taken to prove to a person that they have wronged the other. Rather they come along to help in the process of reconciliation. Sometimes it can be very hard for us to hear the one we have injured clearly. But to talk matters over with some wise and kindly and gracious people present is to create a new atmosphere in which there is more of a chance for us to see things clearly.

5. When in verse 17 Jesus says that if even after this there is still a refusal to listen what do we do next? He says tell it to the church. I do not think this means that we stand up in public and say that there no way forward towards reconciliation. Rather we seek to involve some people in the larger fellowship who are prayerful and discerning and can help to bring about restoration.

If after this has happened and there is still no agreement what does Jesus mean when he then says: "If the member refuses to listen to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. I think he meant something like this: When you have done all this, when you have given the sinner every chance, and when he or she remains stubborn and inflexible, you may think that he is no better than a renegade tax collector or even a godless gentile. Well, you may be right. But I have not found the tax gatherers and the Gentiles and the sinners hopeless. My experience of them is that they, too, have a heart to be touched; and the are many of them, like Matthew and Zaccheus who have become my best friends. Even if the stubborn sinner is like a tax-collector and a Gentile you can still win him, as I have done" This is in fact not an injunction to abandon a person; it is a challenge to win him or her over with the

love which can touch even the hardest heart. It is not a statement that some people are hopeless. It is a statement that Jesus Christ has found no one hopeless and nor should we.

As we seek to apply Jesus tutorial to the mending of fractured relationships it is clear that there will not always be the kind of agreement he speaks of in verse nineteen. However, there is much more opportunity for reconciliation when we apply Jesus words than there is if we choose avoidance, denial and defensiveness.

Where in your life is the Holy Spirit prompting you to apply what Jesus says about the mending of relationships?