

Speaking the Truth in Love©
Matthew 18:12-22 **September 17, 2017** **Rev. Sharlyn Gates**

I feel like there should be a warning sign in the bulletin next to the sermon title – or better yet – right next to the Gospel reading!

Warning! If you are human, normal, breathing then this sermon might touch a nerve! Yes indeed. That does include the one who is preaching.

So if you should hear this sermon and think for a minute it is meant to single out any one person or incident – think again. It might speak to you (and I hope it does to all of us) but it is directed to the community of faith as a whole.

This text has been used for good by many groups. It has been used as a rule for making peace, for working out heated discussions. I have been in Committee on Ministry groups that have included this procedure from Matthew as a guide for working out our differences.

But it has been used by some churches where it has done harm as well. I'll give you an example.

My son was married to the daughter of a man who was pastor of a small, independent, very strict church. They took this passage to the limit. Problem was, they also skipped over the one on one part and even the 2 or 3 going to talk part.

My son and his wife were no different than many married couples. They had their disagreements. She was somewhat controlling and wanted him to conform, which he did not do all the time. Their issues really weren't that big. At least, I don't think so, but I admit, I could be biased.

But because of who his father-in-law was and because his wife complained and cried to daddy every time they had a disagreement, it became the church's business. They used this Scripture from Matthew to have my son stand before the congregation to repent to his wife. Not once but several times.

Sadly, my son and that wife are no longer together. He is happily married to someone else. But the other sad thing is that he has not attended any church since that experience.

You see, I believe they used this passage for the very opposite of what Jesus in Matthew was meaning. Does that sound like the Jesus you know?

We start at verse 12 where Jesus is telling about the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to go out searching for the one lost sheep. It is so important to the shepherd that not one be lost. He trusts that the 99 will be okay and he doesn't stop searching until he has found the lost one and brought it back to the fold.

And THEN Jesus goes on to talk about reconciliation among the community of faith. Because it is imperative that not one be lost; it is of the utmost importance that we keep trying to make amends.

First, Jesus says, go to the person who has offended you and talk to that person face to face – one on one. Try to work it out together.

Can you imagine a community that made that kind of covenant with one another? That was determined that instead of going to someone else and airing a grievance, we would agree to go directly to the person and tell them instead?

I admit it can be a very hard thing to do – to confront someone about something they did that insulted you or hurt you. For me, I get pretty emotional when I'm hurt or angry. And it's hard to say what I want to say when I'm blubbing all over myself.

I think there are several other reasons why we choose to tell someone else instead of the person themselves. I've learned some of this from my training in counseling.

One reason for going to someone else to talk about the issue is that we sometimes think maybe the issue isn't all that big and maybe we are making too much of it and it helps to hear another person's perspective. I mean, who wants to confront someone and then feel foolish as you realize it wasn't a big deal?

But sometimes we talk to others because we want to get people on our side. We want to hear from others that our anger or hurt is justified.

But there is where the danger comes in. Pretty soon your "side" begins to grow and become powerful as more and more tongues start wagging, and others add more grievances and it builds into something that is much bigger and often meaner than it really should have been.

And eventually the "other side" begins to develop and there is a power struggle and division. It becomes a conflict within the community instead of something between two people.

I saw that happen with the church I grew up in. It was the pastor who chose to build sides – talking to others, building allies who would agree with him, until finally there was a large group of the congregation who left when he did and started their own church. And the remnants are still struggling.

So, back to going one on one. As difficult as it is, I have experienced doing just that. It was really hard and I was very nervous the first time I did it. I was still in seminary and there was some one there who decided to control a situation that should have been mine to do.

With the encouragement of a professor I set a meeting time and confronted that person. He was defensive at first, but he finally understood how it made me feel. He did apologize and we did reconcile.

I have also had people come to me to tell me that I said something that offended them. And I too felt myself getting defensive, wanting to justify. But they were right. And I was finally able to see it and apologize.

I am not perfect at it, but I do try to keep an agreement, with people I work with, that we will come to each other and discuss how we feel when one of us says something that hurt. Nine times out of ten, when we talk about it, we realize it is a matter of communication. Saying something in way the other didn't understand, or listening with a different perspective.

Again, can you imagine a community of faith that had a covenant with each other – agreeing to go to the person and speak the truth in love, before ever going to anyone else with the complaint? And in that agreement, we would also be agreeing to listen in love and to not be quick to be defensive.

So many conflicts in so many churches could be solved – or really never even grow if we paid attention to this one rule Jesus gives us as disciples of him.

Jesus is so intent on forgiveness and reconciliation that he says if that doesn't work, don't give up. Do everything you can to get that lost sheep back into the fold.

Go find 2 or 3 very trustworthy mature Christians and have them go with you to talk to the person – not to overpower them but to try to reconcile with them. Showing that you want to make amends. All with the one intent to clear the air and forgive and be friends.

And if THAT doesn't work – THEN – and ONLY then – do you get the whole community involved. And still, it's not to condemn, but to plead with the person to come back, to reconcile, to not walk away from the fold.

Never give up! I think that is what Jesus is trying to say. Do all you can. And if the person refuses then it is his decision to be outside the flock – the community – never the community's decision.

So, then Jesus says that if that is what happens, consider them as tax collectors or Gentiles. Does that mean they are hopeless sinners? Bound for the gates of hell?

Again, does that sound like Jesus? Not to me.

Think about all the stories we have of Jesus – eating with sinners and tax collectors, becoming friends with those others hated and considered low life.

I think Jesus is still saying – “they may have put themselves among those who are on the outside, but we will never give up.”

Jesus talks about where there are even a few – even as few as 2 or 3 – gathered in his name, he is present. He is honoring their sincere prayers. Those prayers that are for others, unselfish and caring, are prayers that are heard and answered. Never give up.

Jesus goes on to say we should forgive. How many times? Not seven times, but seventy seven times.

Can you imagine counting? Making a mark for every time you forgave one person? I think Matthews point – Jesus’ point – is that it is ridiculous to count – because forgiving is what we are about as Jesus’ disciples. And forgiving is imperative as we understand how often God has forgiven us – so numerous we cannot count it and we trust God has not kept count either.

Jesus’ challenge to us – to you and certainly to me as well – is to speak the truth in love; to never give up; to never let go of even one who is a part of the family of God. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans, that we heard Bob read, love does no wrong to a neighbor. Everything we do should be out of love.

It’s not an easy thing to love, to forgive, to seek reconciliation, but it is the Christ-like way. It is the way of a disciple – a follower of Jesus. How are we doing? Can we do better?

May God bless the speaking and the hearing of the message today.
Amen.