

Matthew 18:15-20

### WHERE TWO OR MORE GATHER

Carol M. Noren writes: The 1960s were a time of racial tension throughout the United States, and the high school I attended on the south side of Chicago was no exception. The composition of the student body was about 55 percent white, 40 percent black, and 5 percent Asian or Hispanic. We all had “war stories” of being harassed, threatened, or roughed up by fellow students of another race. Territories were staked out. Before and after classes, fights seemed to break out for the slightest of reasons – or no reasons.

My personal involvement in the hostilities of the time came during gym class one day in my sophomore year, when Peggy, a girl of another race, tried to drown me in the school swimming pool. I had no idea why she did this, except we didn’t share the same skin color. The teacher pushed my attacker away with a pole and then pulled me, choking and shaking, from the water. It was several minutes before I could stand and walk. Meanwhile, Peggy and her friends laughed and pointed at me. I was scared, and angry, and vowed to do something about it. Against the school’s advice, my parents and I went to the police. Peggy was ordered to stay away from me. I began to carry a knife with me at all times. I was ready.

Time passed. Race relations worsened. More than a year after the incident in the swimming pool, Peggy stopped me in the hall between classes. I braced myself for fight or flight – so you can imagine my astonishment when she said, “Carol, I want to say I’m sorry for what I did to you in the pool that day last year. You see, I’ve become a Christian, and now I know that I cannot carry hate in my heart toward anyone. Will you forgive me?”

I wish I could say that my own heart melted with compassion, and we were friends from then on, but that didn’t happen. Oh, I told her I forgave her, and I wanted to mean it, but I didn’t stop carrying a knife. And I didn’t stop carrying a grudge that someone I’d written off as no good and bound for hell had shown me up as having a better understanding of Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness than I had.

As that story suggests, even within the church, arguments and fights occur. It saddens me – and I can only imagine how it must really distress our Lord – when there is disagreement and discord among members of his one body. Where two or more gather in his name, there will be different perspectives, which may lead to differences of opinion and conflict. This comes as no surprise. After all, when we affirm that each person is a sinner, and then, we gather together as a congregation of God’s people, the sinfulness does not go away.

Quite often, when dissension takes place, we tend to make several responses. The first thing we may do is to do nothing. We pretend that nothing has happened and we avoid a fight at all costs. A second strategy is to give the one, who has wronged us, the cold shoulder. We simply shun the offender; we freeze him or her out of our lives. Or, we plan our revenge. We tell others how we have been wronged by someone and, of course, we put our own “spin” on the story so that we are blameless; it’s the other person’s fault!

Any of those responses may come naturally to us but it’s not the spiritual response Jesus wants and expects from his disciples. He knew there would be times when his disciples would not agree with one another, could not get along. Therefore, on his way to the cross, he covered a range of topics including what to do if a member of the church sins against another.

It’s not a matter of if someone wrongs you but when someone wrongs you, here’s the plan our Lord laid out for us. First of all, take note that Jesus puts the burden on the victim, on the person who has been harmed; if we wait for the aggressor to take the initiative, we may wait a very long time. Furthermore, Jesus seems less interested in who’s right and who’s wrong than he

is in restoring the peace within his church and getting the family of faith back together again.

So, if we have been wronged, we are to go to the one who hurt us and have a conversation about the problem. Hopefully, both persons will listen (really listen!) to the other so that both points of view are heard, and the matter can be resolved. If that doesn't work, we invite one or two other members to sit down with us. They can bring objectivity and a different, impartial perspective to the conversation. They will help to facilitate the listening process so that both parties clearly hear what the other person is saying and help them move beyond the problem to a peaceful solution. And, if that doesn't work, we are to bring the other person before the church fellowship so that, in an atmosphere of Christian love, prayer, and fellowship, the problem can finally be resolved and the relationship can be restored.

But, what if that doesn't work? What if the problem and discord still exist, what then? Jesus said, "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector," which some have interpreted to mean let the person go, excommunicate the unrepentant offender. Before we wash our hands of the one who has sinned against us, we need to take note of the immediate as well as the broader context surrounding this piece of instruction. Jesus had just told the parable of the lost sheep and how the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in order to search for the one that is lost. Then, right after our text, Jesus informed Peter to forgive someone seventy-seven times, which means over and over again (after all, that's precisely how Jesus relates to each one of us). And, this is the very same Jesus, who ate with tax collectors and showed compassion to the Gentiles. Thus, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are to treat those who sin against us, not as enemies to be despised but as brothers and sisters to be loved and guided back into relationship with us. We are not to love them less but more!

Jesus' advice is aimed at winning back a relationship that is in danger of being lost. He commands us to work for the relationship, not against it. Our goal is reconciliation, not retribution. Jesus wants us to understand that being right is less important than being in relationship. It's important for us to realize that God, in Christ, never gives up on anyone, and we are called to go and do likewise!

Jesus' words about what's done on earth being paralleled in heaven reminds us that our forgiveness of one another is but a pale reflection of God's forgiveness of us in Jesus. Even when we disobeyed God and through our disobedience broke our relationship with God, even when we killed God's only Son, God took the initiative, came back to us, set things right, and forgave us so that the relationship might continue. Thus, in our attempts to offer and to receive forgiveness, you and I mirror in our own small ways what God has done for us. When we forgive, and when we humbly confess the wrong we have done and ask to be forgiven, here in our church we become a corner of heaven.

Forgiveness is not optional for Christians. We are to forgive one another – just as we have been forgiven. Yes, forgiveness for the one who has wronged us (and, perhaps, whom we have wronged!) may be difficult and it will require a lot of hard work on our part. But, when we offer forgiveness or when we receive forgiveness, we bring peace to the relationship, we help heal the rift in the community of faith, and we honor Jesus our Lord.

And, we have the Lord's assurance that, wheretwo or more gather to work out problems, he will be there in our midst to impart strength, protection, consolation, and a sense of direction. It's difficult to confront someone who has sinned against us but, when we do, Jesus promises to be with both persons in the process. Jesus calls us to be in a new kingdom, a community where bridges are built, not burned, where people walk toward each other, not away, where relationships are restored, not written off. (Dave Ridder)

Charles Colson's prison ministry takes people into prisons to meet with prisoners, worship with them, get to know them, and help them as best they can. In a large prison, where they were to have an execution the next day, one of Colson's prison fellowship groups went to the prison to meet with the prisoners. As usual, everyone in the group was carefully accounted for as they went in. The prayer meeting was held, and the prisoners filed out. On their way out of the prison, Colson's group was shocked to find that one of the members of their group had followed the prisoners back to their cells. They found their lost member sitting in a prisoner's cell, having prayer with the prisoner. It was the cell of the man who was to be executed. The enraged group leader asked the man, "How could you risk this? How could you do this to us? In all our years of prison ministry, we've never had anyone in any of our groups do this." The man answered, "My name is Judge Brewer. I am the judge who sentenced this man. I am here because we both need time to forgive one another."

I don't think it's coincidental that the gospel lesson falls on this Sunday. In fact, I believe it is quite providential that this lesson on forgiveness and the hard work that it entails occurs on Labor Day weekend. As we heard last week, the way of the cross is a summons to costly discipleship, and forgiveness certainly falls within that category. But, when we give and experience forgiveness, there is peace within the relationship as well as in the church, and there is great joy in heaven. Our Lord rejoices when we turn away from getting even and take steps toward getting back together.

Let us prepare ourselves to come to the table of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We are welcomed at his table because we are forgiven. And, at this table and going forward, let us show compassion, mercy, and love to one another for it is the Christ-like thing to do. Where two or more gather in Jesus' name, he makes this promise: "I am there among them." Let us take Jesus at his word, and may we share the bread, the cup, and his love with one another – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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