

Matthew 18:15-20 9/04/11 Pastor Bill Uetricht 12 Pentecost

I have to admit that the lessons for today threw me into a little crisis this past week. Doggonit! They became living word again for me. I mean, I thought I had life figured out. I thought I knew what it meant to be psychologically healthy. I pride myself in being psychology healthy. And most of the psychologists, especially from the Western world, would tell you that *boundaries* are at the heart of what it means to be healthy. I am I, and you are you. And problems arise when I forget that, when I and you become, as the psychologists describe it, enmeshed. I think I am relatively good at boundaries.

I've become amused, if not irritated, with the people who feel that they need to run other people's lives, or become preoccupied with their lives and their choices. This is really insignificant, but I find it a bit perplexing when I hear adults talk about the choices of other adults in this kind of way: "I don't know why she bought that; I think it's kind of silly. She doesn't know what she is getting herself into." She might not, but guess what? She's the one who bought it. She's the one who is going to have to deal with the implications of her purchase. Why are you putting so much energy into something that is not yours to worry about? Perhaps you remember an old Hank Williams Sr. song that Hank Williams Jr. made famous in the eighties in which we hear: "Mind your own business, 'cause if you mind your own business you won't be mindin' mine."

I feel like I've been getting there. I feel like I've been trying harder and harder to mind my own business. I feel like I've been working on the boundaries thing. And then, God in Ezekiel comes along and says: "So you, Ezekiel, I have made a lookout for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them

warning from me. If I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked ones, you shall surely die,’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their [evil] ways, [baby], the wicked shall die in their inequity, but their blood I will require at your hand.”

Come on, God! The wicked are the ones doing the evil things. Why make Ezekiel responsible? Come on, God! You know about boundaries. Just last week I said that we are not responsible for how people react to us. Their reactions are their reactions. Our reactions are our reactions. I thought I was getting this straightened out in my little brain, and now you say that Ezekiel, the prophet, the preacher, has responsibility for the people he’s preaching to. I am a preacher. I am feeling a little burdened. I have a responsibility not only to but for these folks? Crisis point number one.

Crisis point number two and number three came my way when I looked closely at the first sentence of our gospel lesson for today. Jesus, do you really mean this? “If another member of the church, the assembly, sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” Crisis point number two. Really, Jesus? If someone else sins against me, I am supposed to go to them and deal with the issue. Now, I can understand if I have done something to someone else I should seek them out and offer my apology. But if someone has done something wrong against me I am supposed to seek them out? That is ridiculous! I didn’t do anything. I am not responsible for what they did to me. I mean, I probably will offer them forgiveness, but they should come to me. It’s the least that they should do, especially since they have hurt me. Jesus, your words don’t make rational sense.

The second part of your first sentence makes rational sense, but I do feel that your words, nonetheless, send me into a crisis—the kind of

crisis that regret and guilt bring. “Go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” Ooh! Crisis point number three. I am not so good at this one. Let’s face it, Jesus! It is so much fun to “triangulate,” as the psychologists call it. If I am mad at Marilyn, what fun is there in speaking only to Marilyn about my issues? And besides, it’s tough to talk to her. I don’t know how she will respond. Or maybe I do know, and I don’t want to have to face that response. It’s just easier to talk to Rosemary about Marilyn. Jesus, you are such a crisis initiator!

What do you mean that crisis is what love brings? I hear Paul. It’s all about love. We are to owe no one anything, except to love one another. Love is the fulfillment of the law. The commandments can be summed up in one sentence: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love is about caring for the neighbor. And yes, you are right. Love isn’t always easy. Love takes us to the place where we have responsibility for the other. Yes, love so longs for reconciliation with the other that it calls us to treat the other with great dignity and respect. Love will not allow us to take the easy road of talking about people behind their backs.

Jesus, your three-fold approach to conflict really is quite telling. If someone sins against me, I am supposed to go to them directly and try to solve the problem with that direct conversation. If that doesn’t work, I am supposed to bring a couple of people along to talk with the person who has sinned against me, not because we want to gang up on them, but so that “the presence of witnesses will keep things honest.” (Peterson, **The Message Bible**) And then if that doesn’t work, I am to take the matter to the whole church.

Jesus, this method is so deliberate, so desirous of reconciliation, so respectful of the dignity of the sinner. Although I must admit, I don’t quite know what to do with your comment about allowing the one who

does not listen to the witness of the whole church to be to us “as a Gentile and a tax collector.” That does seem a bit harsh. Are you throwing me into another crisis, trying to confuse me? I thought I was getting acclimated to your strange world. And now you seem to be returning to the kind of world that most of us live in. But I do remember this: a couple of weeks ago you were enamored with a *Gentile* woman. “Great is her faith,” you said. And I also have this recollection that you tended to hang out with tax collectors. Maybe your comment about casting off the sinner is more gracious than I thought. Maybe writing off people is never what we are invited into.

You know, Jesus, all this conflict resolution talk makes me think that perhaps conflict isn’t such a bad thing. Maybe the crisis that you are creating for me is helping me to see not only that we indeed have responsibility to and for one another (it’s not always about “minding my own business”), and that that responsibility means that the conflict we know in our relationships is not something we should run from. Sarah Dylan says that conflict can be “a training ground for mission.” If indeed, as Paul puts it, God in Christ is reconciling the world to himself and that is the message we have for the world, then as we live out reconciliation (and how can we do that if there is no conflict?), we are preparing ourselves for the work that we have in the world. The issue then is not how we avoid conflict or eliminate it, but rather how we seek reconciliation in the midst of our conflicts.

You know that I am quite fond of you all and that I think that it is hard to find a nicer group of folks than us, if I am so bold to say that. We really are nice. I think we sometimes are afraid that some of the conflicts we have might destroy our niceness or may make us look bad to others. And admittedly, sometimes conflict does just that. It tears

communities apart, and we do look bad to the world. But the real issue is not the elimination of conflict. Even nice people like us have conflict. Maybe what really matters is not how we avoid it, but how we resolve it.

The bottom line message of the Christian faith is that God is about the business of making right relationships that are broken, God is in the business of reconnecting humanity and all of creation to him, reconciling people to people, people to the earth, people to themselves. The cross, we Christians say, is at the center of that reconciling work. In the cross, God is busy taking upon himself conflict so that the world might be reconnected, reconciled. God doesn't run from conflict, so I suppose we don't need to either. As we embrace it, though, we must never lose sight of the very significant call that we have to live out care and love for those with whom we have conflict. The dignity and worth of others must always be respected as we deal with them and even with what they have done to us.

By the way, boundaries probably are a good thing. We do well sometimes to mind our own business. But being a part of the church means that we have a deep responsibility for one another. The church is a great gift. We are called to care for that gift: to warn one another, to keep each other accountable, to care for one another so much that we deal directly with each other.

Jesus, I normally don't think this way. But I'm grateful for the crisis you bring me into. It's amazing where love will take us.