

## Where Is God in All This?

At a church that's far away from here, one of its pastors relates an incident that took place at an administrative council meeting. He begins: "We were having a fierce debate about how to expand our community clothes closet ministry for the poor. The room where the clothing was being stored had been outgrown, and we needed to decide whether we could continue this ministry at the church or ought to move it elsewhere.

Two of the council members got into an argument. One of the participants called the other one a 'hypocrite who doesn't really care about this ministry.' The other person was reduced to tears. Leaving the room weeping. Saying that she would never again come back to the church.

They all sat there stunned. 'She was never really committed to this work anyway,' added the person who had made the hurtful comment.

In the awkward silence that followed, another council member said, 'Look at us! Here we sit, doing the work of the Lord, loving the poor. And yet we *exemplary* Christians can't

even have a meeting together without slashing one another to bits with our words!’

Their pastor observed that ‘In that moment, we saw enacted the scripture from Matthew eighteen.’” He surely would have affirmed that Jesus’ words on how to handle hurts and disagreements in the church need to be heard in believing communities even today. Perhaps *especially* today.

These procedures Jesus outlines used to be practiced by Christian communities. But more than a few contemporary churches seem to consider them outmoded. In many churches today, if someone gets hurt, there’s subtle pressure to not “make a big deal of it.” The prevailing culture is about not rocking the boat. The offended one is likely to suffer in silence or—sadly—to actually leave the church. Often without telling anyone the reason.

But Jesus lists particular steps that are to be followed *if another member of the church*—a brother or sister in your faith family—*sins against you*.

Do you hear that *if*? Interpreters suggest that maybe the first word in that sentence shouldn’t be *if*, but *when*. *When* your brother or sister sins against you. The church is a family. And

even though we might not like to admit it, family members sometimes hurt one another. That's why, in this Sunday's reading from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus offers us these words of wisdom, these words of counsel.

Jesus teaches that when someone hurts you, you are to go to that person and talk about it one-on-one. Try to resolve it in private. But if that attempt doesn't succeed, meet again in the presence of one or two others, so there will be a witness to whatever is said.

If it still can't be worked out, Jesus instructs, take it before the congregation or its governing body. If the church's exhortation goes unheeded, then—as far as you're concerned—that person is to be treated like a Gentile or a tax collector.

Now you know that in Jesus' day, tax collectors are despised for collaborating with imperial Rome and for collecting more than is due, in order to line their own pockets. They, along with Gentiles, are excluded from the community of faith.

So when Jesus tells us to treat someone like a Gentile or a tax collector, does that mean we're to have nothing more to do with that person? At first, it sounds that way, doesn't it?

But wait a minute. This is *Jesus* saying these words. How does Jesus *himself* treat Gentiles? Pagans? Heathens? Sinners? And tax collectors?

Matthew, whose name this Gospel bears, was a second-career disciple. And what did he do before Jesus called him and brought him into the circle of those closest to him? You got it. Matthew was a tax collector.

Tax collectors and sinners are the very people Jesus reaches out to. Tax collectors and sinners are the very people Jesus gets criticized and castigated for hanging out with. He has a special love, a compassionate love, a deep love for lost ones who have wandered.

In Matthew's Gospel, just before these verses, Jesus tells about a shepherd with a hundred sheep. When one strays, he leaves the ninety-nine to search for the lost one. When he finds that lost sheep, he picks it up and lays it on his shoulder. Rejoicing over it, he brings it back into the fold. And he invites you and me to do the same.

I share with you a story about a business meeting in a tension-filled room. The management team had been dealing with the problem of an employee who had committed a theft.

One person declared: “This business can’t function with people who are thieves.” Another warned: “All of the employees will be watching to see if we enforce the rules.” A third person stated: “This is a cut-and-dried case. She admitted that she stole the money. It’s as simple as that.”

Then a fourth colleague, a rather quiet person, spoke up. “I think our company ought to be the sort of place where *people* are more important even than good rules. As you say, she has admitted her guilt. There are mitigating circumstances—her marriage situation, her two children. None of that excuses this. But I don’t think she’s asking to be excused. I think she’s asking us to give her another chance. I’d like all of our employees to know that this is the sort of company where someone can make a terrible, tragic mistake, do wrong, and yet be given a second chance.”

We worship and serve a God who, even as he hangs on a cross, offers a second chance to a thief hanging on the cross beside him. We worship and serve a God who offers sinners a second chance. We worship and serve a God who offers a second chance to each one of us—no matter what we’ve done.

Maybe we—who have been recipients of such measureless grace—have failed to reach out to someone who needs a second chance. Maybe we haven't always treated one another the way we should.

Maybe the apostle Paul has our sometimes unloving human nature in mind when he writes to Christians at Rome that most of God's commandments can be summed up in just one: Love your neighbor as yourself. Paul reminds them and reminds us that love means doing no wrong to the neighbor. Doing no harm is one of John Wesley's General Rules for us—for the people called Methodists. And words can do harm.

But no matter how carefully we think before we speak, and no matter how hard we strive to speak the truth in love, members of the faith community aren't always going to see eye to eye on everything. Conflict is as old as the church. It's going to arise. The issue is how we handle it.

And Jesus preaches about how we, his followers, are to handle conflict. In his best-known sermon, earlier in this same Gospel, he says, when you're at worship, and *you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave*

*your gift...and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*

That's why we share the peace of Christ just before offering our gifts. We enjoy greeting one another and visiting with one another during this time. And Fairfield Circuit churches have a tradition of doing just that. But sharing the peace of Christ is really all about seeking out one with whom you may have differences. And in that moment, beginning the process of reconciliation.

Which gives us hope in our Lord's assurance that when two who were previously in conflict come to agreement, their prayer request will be heard and answered. And Jesus offers a second assurance, too, that—in the work of conflict-resolving—is very full of comfort.

For, beloved, when conflict does arise in the church, one of the first questions—maybe *the* first question—we want to ask, need to ask, is *where is God in all this?* Where is God in all of this? Can we set aside differences long enough to pray for the wisdom to deal with conflict as Christ would have us deal with it? And to pray for the vision to discern his grace-filled, guiding presence in it?

The presence of God in Christ Jesus is promised at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel—as Emmanuel. God-with-us. At the closing of Matthew's Gospel, we hear that same promise of this One who is with us always, even to the end of the age. And he who has promised is faithful. He is the One who is there with us, even in the middle of human bickering and squabbling. He is the One who is at the very center of our worship, at the very center of our conferencing, at the very center of our fellowship. Showing us how to love him. How to love his church. And how to love one another. The real and abiding presence of Christ dwells in our hearts and is at the heart of what we believe. At the heart of gospel truth.

And today we claim that blessed truth. We who have been drawn together in this place. Here, we're gathered as a family. Here, Christ meets us. Here, Christ is present to us. Here, God is in our midst. Thanks be to God!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.