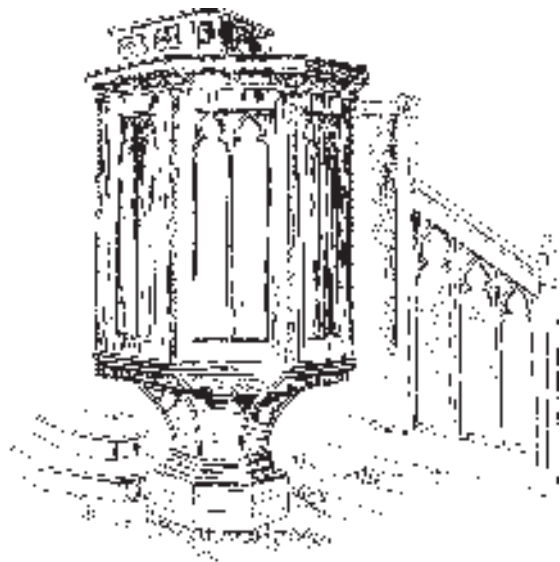


March 21, 2010

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

**Peacemaking:
The Believer's Calling
5. Gently Restore**

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Matthew 18:15-17

Matthew has no romantic illusions about the church. He knows that the church is not all sweet thoughts, endlessly patient saints, and cloudless skies. In Matthew's church, people—no matter how committed—are still people, and stormy weather is always a possible forecast. "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love"; even so, painful breaks can occur in once tender and loving relationships. "We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord"; nevertheless, sharp and cruel words can split a congregation into angry factions. "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord"; but greed, lust, and envy can threaten to shake even a strong church off its footing. What happens when the menu at the church potluck includes such unwelcome entrees as rage, hatred, and betrayal?

"If another member of the church sins against you," Jesus begins, and what follows is a detailed process for dealing with those bitter conflicts that realistically will arise in every Christian congregation. Many Christian groups and denominations have used his recommendations as a model for church discipline and for handling conflict. Its most impressive feature is how persistent and time

consuming it is. In this process, nobody is written off in haste, no one is fired on the spot, no one slams the door in another's face in rage; no one hangs up the phone in anger. To the contrary, a sea of energy is expended trying, time and again, to make peace. In contrast to the attitudes of the prevailing culture ("If somebody hassles you, forget them. It's their problem, not yours."), 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.

Reconciliation is a huge issue today. We see clearly the results of not doing it: suicide bombs, campaigns of terror, heavy-handed repression by occupying forces. That's on the large scale. On the smaller scale, we see broken marriages, shattered families, feuds between neighbors, divided churches.

In March 2006, a city dump truck backed into Curtis Gokey's car. The car was damaged badly, so Gokey sued the city of Lodi, California, for \$3,600.

The catch? Curtis Gokey was driving the city dump truck that crunched his personal car. He even admitted the accident was his fault. The city dropped the lawsuit, stating that Gokey could not sue himself. Like Gokey, when it comes to peaceful reconciliation we are often our own worst enemies.

If we are to look at our passage at its widest, what Jesus was saying is this: "If anyone sins against you, spare no effort to make that person admit the fault, and to get things right again between you." Basically, the text is saying that we must never tolerate any situation in which there is a breach of personal relationship between us and another member of the Christian community.

Suppose something does go wrong, what are we to do to put it right? This passage presents us with a whole scheme of action for the mending of broken relationships within the Christian fellowship.

If we feel that someone has wronged us, we should immediately put our complaint into words. The worst thing that we can do about a wrong is to brood about it. That is fatal. It can poison the whole mind and life, until we can think of nothing else but our sense of personal injury. Any such feeling should be brought out into the open, faced, and stated - and often the very stating of it will show how unimportant and trivial the whole thing is.

Many of us prefer to pretend there isn't a problem. We can refuse to face the facts, swallow our anger or resentment, paper over the cracks, and carry on as if everything is normal while seething with rage inside. Or we can simply avoid and ignore the other person or group, and pretend they don't exist. That may sometimes be the only way (when a total stranger offends you, for instance, and you don't have a chance to talk to them and work it through). But usually it's disastrous.

If we feel that someone has wronged us, we should put the matter right **personally—face to face**. The writing of letters has exasperated personal conflict more than almost anything else. A letter may be misread and misunderstood; it may quite unconsciously convey a tone it was never meant to convey. E-mail is even worse, and an angry phone call is not much better. If we have a difference

with someone, there is only one way to settle it - and that is face to face. The spoken word can often settle a difference which the written word would only have aggravated.

As an aside—and this is so obvious that I'm almost embarrassed to mention it—anonymous written communication is never appropriate. It is cowardly and spineless. Our *Presbyterian Church Book of Order* puts it this way, "Reliance on anonymous assertions is repugnant to fair and orderly process." Right now, in our very own Presbytery of the Miami Valley, a church is imploding because of widespread anonymous communication. A gifted minister will soon leave under a cloud of suspicion. An Administrative Commission from the Presbytery will take over the Session. The congregation will no doubt take years to recover—and for what? All because some folks were not forthright enough to communicate personally and directly in a spirit of love and grace.

So... first go and see the person, one on one. That needs courage; it also needs prayer and humility. The other person may well respond with a counter-accusation, and there may be truth in it which you need to recognize, though it certainly isn't always the case that both sides are equally to blame.

If that works, and I have known the joy of it on more than one occasion, sometimes when I've been rightly accused of something and sometimes when I've had to confront someone else - then it's wonderful. "You've gained a brother or sister," says Jesus, and that really is what it feels like. Reconciliation often creates a closer bond than you had in the first place.

However, if a private and personal meeting fails in its purpose, Jesus tells us in our passage, we should take some wise person or persons with us. Deuteronomy 19:15 says: "A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained." That is the saying which Matthew has in mind. But in this case, the taking of the witnesses is not meant to be a way of proving to someone that he or she has committed an offense. It is meant to help the process of reconciliation. People often hate those whom they have injured most of all; and it may well be that nothing we can say can win them back. But to talk matters over with some wise and kindly and gracious folks, all of whom are present, is to create a new atmosphere in which there is at least a chance that we should see ourselves as others see us. The Rabbis had a wise saying: "Judge not alone, for none may judge alone save One [that is, God]."

I recall a response to a sermon I preached at another church. The sermon was on lying—white lies, black lies, even unintentional, inadvertent lies. One of the examples I used was from an ethics professor at Harvard, Dr. Sissela Bok, I think, who talked about placebos being a lie. Well, there was a doctor in the congregation who didn't like that example one bit. I had examples galore in the sermon from advertising, government, the military, politics, history—all kinds of things. They were okay, but the medical example was a no, no! You could say he was furious, but that would be an understatement. What was he to do?

He could have just swallowed his rage. He could have taken a few Sundays off from church. He could have yelled at his dog. He didn't do that.

He could have told a couple of his friends, talked behind my back and started a smear campaign against me. He didn't do that.

He could have picked up the phone and laid me out. He didn't do that.

He could have gone home and written me a nasty note—maybe signing it, maybe not—something that would just blow me out of the water on Wednesday morning. (This was well before E-mail.) He didn't do that either.

What he did do was calm down after a couple of days and then he invited me to lunch. Calmly and graciously he told me how he felt I had offended him. He said he had always tried to be honest, especially in his medical practice. He was a dermatologist. From his perspective my example of a placebo being a lie was like calling him a liar right there in worship while he was sitting in the fifth pew with his wife and three daughters.

We talked. I listened to him. He listened to me. I apologized. He apologized. He told me some personal things that were going on at work that somehow had touched off his anger. We prayed together.

You know, Bob Scott and I left that lunch not only reconciled, but good friends.