

## SERMON "LIVE AND LET LIVE!"

(Matthew 18:15-21 Preached at MPC on September 10, 2017)

Jesus never makes it easy, does he! Let me ask this question. If someone hurts you, who is at fault? Most of us would say that the person who caused the hurt is at fault—but that isn't necessarily true. Maybe we were hurt because we were too thin-skinned—too sensitive—too ready to be offended. That won't always be true, but sometimes it is.

Now let me ask another question. If someone hurts you, who should take the initiative to kiss and make up—to salve the wound—to apologize and make amends? That seems obvious. The person who injured us should take the initiative to right the wrong—to apologize—to help us to get over our injury.

But I started this sermon by saying that Jesus never makes it easy—and that's true. Jesus never lets us off the hook. Whether we're the offended party or the offender, Jesus lays the burden of reconciliation on us.

Let me say that again. Whether we're the offended party or the offender, Jesus lays the burden of reconciliation on us. Listen to what Jesus says: "If your brother sins against you, go, show him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained back your brother.

But if he doesn't listen, take one or two more with you, that at the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the (church). If he refuses to hear the (church) also, let him be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:15-17).

Let me be clear about what Jesus meant. When he said, "If your brother sins against you," Jesus was talking about your Christian brother or sister. He was talking about other church members. He was telling us that, if another Christian offends us, we have a responsibility to go to him or her and state the problem, trying to affect a reconciliation.

He says, "If he (or she) listens to you, you have gained back your brother (or sister)."

Then he goes on to say that, if the Christian brother or sister refuses to reconcile, get one or two Christians to go with you so that they might help to affect a reconciliation.

But what do we do when the person who caused the offense refuses to change? Jesus says that the third step is to take the matter to the church. If the offender refuses to bow to the authority of the church, Jesus says, "Let him be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector."

In other words, cut him off. Make it clear that he is no longer in good standing in the church.

It isn't that Jesus was looking for draconian punishments. What he really wanted to do was to put enough pressure on the offender that he would repent and seek forgiveness.

But can you imagine doing that? Can you imagine involving the whole church in an attempt to reconcile with someone? Can you imagine excommunicating a person who refuses to reconcile?

This is a difficult text, because it calls us to be more confrontational and judgmental than we want to be. We live in a "Live and let live" world, and we like it like that! If we have a problem with one person, there are plenty of other people. If someone does something we don't like, we can find someone else.

We live in a disposable world. We use disposable razors. We used to repair small appliances, but now it's more economical to buy new ones. We turn over cell phones so rapidly that we almost consider them disposable. We even bulldoze buildings that were built not very long ago so that we can build new buildings.

That disposable mentality carries over to our relationships:

- o People used to work for one company all their lives. Now we change employers as easily as we buy a new pair of shoes.

- o People used to live in one community all of their lives. They called it home. Now we move from place to place-all the houses look alike-and we struggle to remember our address.

o People used to stay married, even if they weren't always happy. Now we move from relationship to relationship and from spouse to spouse so that we lose track of whose kids are whose.

o We used to feel strong ties to our church, by which we meant a particular group of people meeting for worship in a particular place. Furthermore, we identified ourselves as Methodists or Presbyterians or Catholics or whatever. If we did move, we looked for a church of our denomination in our new community.

Those connections are less important to us these days. So it's hard to accept it when Jesus says: "If your brother sins against you, go, show him his fault."

o Jesus is saying that people aren't disposable.

o He's saying that relationships are important.

o He's saying that, at least in the church, we don't have the luxury of writing people off.

o He's saying that, when there are problems, we must not just walk away and hit the delete button.

o He's saying that it's worth a great deal of time and effort and discomfort to reconcile with the other person.

o He's saying that, in the church, reconciliation is so important that a person who stubbornly holds a grudge should be dismissed. That sounds as if Jesus considers that person disposable, but he does not. Dismissing a person from the church was intended to wake the person up and to call that person to repentance.

Jesus tells us to love one another. We like that! It sounds so warm and friendly! If everyone would just love one another, what a great world this would be! But in this text Jesus gets into specifics and tells us the nitty gritty of love, and we don't like that at all. The nitty gritty of love is demanding. It requires more than we want to give.

But human relationships are important! When human relationships break down, the result is tragic. It's tragic when friends become enemies. It's tragic when Christians fight each other. It's tragic when marriages break up. Sometimes those things cannot be helped but, too often, we just didn't try. Jesus calls us to try.

The irony is that we have learned that we cannot live forever in a world where we discard newspapers and cans and bottles. We live on a small planet. We have to recycle to survive. Now Jesus is teaching us that we cannot live forever in a world where we discard people. We need to learn reconciliation just as we have learned recycling.

After the Columbine High School shootings, it became popular for high school students to wear small black-and-white patches on their clothing. The patches bore a single word--RESPECT.

Those patches traced their roots to that terrible day in Columbine High School in which two boys killed 12 of their fellow students, a teacher, and themselves. Those patches were intended to remind students and teachers alike how important respect is. The patches were intended to prevent another Columbine.

What happened at Columbine? As nearly as anyone can understand it, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris considered themselves outcasts at school. Whether other kids treated them badly or whether Klebold and Harris just imagined it that way, the results were tragic. The two boys, feeling isolated and unappreciated, sought revenge against athletes, Christians and other more popular kids. They went on a killing rampage that took 15 lives, including their own.

So students began to wear Respect badges to football games, basketball games, student council meetings, and other student activities. They hoped that these reminders of the tragedy at Columbine-and the positive message of the patches-would encourage kids to treat each other with respect-and head off any further tragedy.

Our text today speaks of relationships, not among high school students, but among church members. It says that relationships in the church are so important that it's worth going to extraordinary lengths to keep them healthy. It prescribes a process that

encourages Christians to treat each other with respect. When there's a problem, we're not to sulk. We're not to write each other off. We're not to build walls of separation. We're not to refuse to talk to each other. When a problem exists, we're to take the initiative to solve it. Even though we might feel that we are the victim, Jesus tells us to take the leadership to establish reconciliation.

The world is full of alienated people. The world is full of lonely people. It need not be so! The answer to the problem is to take relationships seriously. That's what Jesus is teaching us in our text today. We might not head off a mass murder, but we can count on dispelling lots of loneliness--some of it our own.

Maybe we should start to wear Respect badges to church. Shouldn't we show respect to those who share our faith--who pray with us and for us! Shouldn't we show respect to people with whom we share the Lord's Supper!

Maybe we should wear Respect badges at home. Shouldn't we show respect to our husband or wife--to our children! Shouldn't children show respect to their parents--and to each other!

But that doesn't always happen, does it! Sometimes we treat people at work respectfully, because we must--but then we exercise our anger against those who ought to be nearest and dearest--to our own family. How tragic!

Let's do whatever we can to show respect to others--to seek reconciliation when there's a problem--to mend fences. Let's not wait for the other person to take the first step. Jesus places the responsibility squarely on our shoulders. He will bless us if we obey.