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The Federated Church of Hyannis
The Reverend Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor

UNITED POWER
Matthew 18:15-20

There was a church where the pastor and the minister of music were not getting along. As time went by this began to spill over into the worship service. The pastor planned a series of sermons hoping to address the situation. The first week the pastor preached on commitment and how we all should dedicate ourselves to the service of God. The music director led the song, "I Shall Not Be Moved." The second week the pastor preached on tithing and how we all should gladly give to the work of the Lord. The director led the song, "Jesus Paid it All."

The third week the pastor preached on gossiping and how we should all watch our tongues. The music director led the song, "I Love to Tell the Story." With all this going on, the pastor became very disgusted over the situation and the following Sunday told the congregation that he was considering resigning. The musician led the song, "Oh Why Not Tonight?" As it came to pass, the pastor did indeed resign. The next week he informed the church that it was Jesus who led him there and it was Jesus who was taking him away. The music leader led the song, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

What do you do if you feel wronged? Did you know that dueling is still legal in Paraguay – as long as both parties are registered blood donors? Often differences are faced by using silence. One of the problems police across the nation have is the code of silence that no one is to tell. No matter what the crime or what you have seen never tell on anyone, even if you are the victim. But the silence only makes the problem worse.

What if we say nothing when problems arise? There has been a theory of child rearing that basically refuses to speak words of correction to a child because of some notion that it is bad for children. There is a true story of a couple visiting his son's home. They spent a few days with the son, daughter-in-law and a pampered, undisciplined grandson.

After a tantrum in a department store, the grandson came home with a toy fire fighter's helmet. Quickly becoming bored with wearing the hat, the lad began to strike his grandfather as hard as he could with the hat, not once but continuously. "Please don't hit me with that," the grandfather said. But the boy continued while the mother sat silently, reading her magazine. The pounding continued. Finally the mother put down her magazine and yelled, "Stop that. You're going to break your new hat!"

Some respond by quitting and never resolving their differences. The group that drops out of the church most frequently are confirmands, those 13-year-olds who are asked to and sometimes forced to join the church by their parents. The next largest group of drop outs are those who have served on church boards. They are the ones who face the greatest challenge living out these words that Jesus spoke.

Some want to take grievances about members right to the congregation. The public disciplining of church members is not very popular today and for good reason. But it was done in an earlier day. In Colonial times people were, in fact, brought before the church and were subject to discipline.

At one church I served in Massachusetts I read of people being brought before the church for the use of profanity, for failure to attend worship on the Sabbath, for public intoxication. One lady who forced to come before the church and confess publicly to have broken the 7th commandment – and yes, it is the one you are thinking of.

"If another member of the church sins against you..." We usually think of sinning against us if someone throws a rock through our car window or steals our lawn mower. That is why few of us think of ourselves as sinners or, at best, what my mother used to refer to church members as: "medium sized sinners" – not the bad people who deal drugs and go out carousing, just kind of imperfect people.

The word "sin" in scripture can refer to a particular thing we do, but mostly the word "sin" as used in the Bible literally means to "miss the mark," as an archer can miss the mark on a target. That is mostly how we sin. We know someone needs our help and we do not do anything and we miss the opportunity. We try to speak words of comfort to a grieving person but make them feel worse. We have missed our goal. We wanted to help solve

a problem but we only muddle things up. We even made others miss their objective.

Jesus in these simple steps explained how differences in the church should be handled. I don't know how many times someone has told me they want something practical from the Bible. Well here it is. I think if that request was honestly finished it would be, "I want something practical from the Bible – that is easy to do and will bring me personal benefit and won't take too much time or cost me anything." Well, here it is. It is from the Bible and practical and will benefit you but it isn't quick or easy or without cost.

Jesus gave us a process that begins with two people: the one feeling wronged and the person who offended him. If those two can't get it resolved then they should ask a trusted friend or two for help. Only as a last resort do you go to a committee or congregational meeting. And if that doesn't work then just stay away from them. Avoid them. Don't keep carrying on the same grudge. Love your enemies, don't irritate them.

The means of reconciliation as Jesus spoke of it is not so much an event as it is a process. There are steps we need to take and sometimes we have to take them again and again and again. Sometimes the first effort works and sometimes it does not. Sometimes we need more than one strategy to open communication. But it is critical to know that this only works one way. If you try to begin at the end by raising your differences with a person in a meeting before you have spoken with them personally it is simply a recipe for escalating an unresolved conflict.

I am painfully aware of what happens when folks go right to a church meeting to launch an attack on a person without following these words of Jesus to talk with them first in private. In fact when something is first brought up in public rather than in private it is a way of keeping people from being reconciled.

What happens when we hold on to the grudges? Many years ago, Colonel Jeff O'Leary served as part of the UN peacekeeping forces in the Sinai Peninsula region. While there, he encountered a number of Bedouin people, a nomadic people who travel this desert region. One afternoon, he had tea with a group of Bedouin men. Colonel O'Leary couldn't help but notice that his host kept staring at a man who was tending his camels.

The host pointed out the man and hissed at Colonel O’Leary, “Do you see that man? He is a camel thief.” Colonel O’Leary wanted to know why his host would hire a camel thief to tend his camels, so he began asking questions. It turns out that in his host’s eyes this man was a camel thief because he came from a family of camel thieves. Why were they a family of camel thieves?

His answer was because one of their ancestors had once stolen some camels from this man’s family. How long ago, O’Leary asked. Eight hundred years ago, the Bedouin host replied. For eight hundred years, the hosts’ family and this man’s family had hated each other, because one man had stolen the other man’s camels. For eight hundred years, the host’s family had passed down the story of the camel thief.

Forgiveness was not an option for them. In the Bedouin host’s mind, the crime was just as horrible as if it had occurred yesterday, and this man was just as much a thief as his ancestor who had actually stolen the camel eight centuries earlier. That is what it is like in life and faith if we do not work for reconciliation. We pass along the suspicion and anger generation after generation.

I believe one of the reasons Jesus’ advice is so seldom followed is that we mostly read this as advice in helping to correct others, not how they should correct us. We want to help show others the error of their ways and any effort on their part to help us understand something we have done only gets in our way. “Please move that log. I am looking for the splinter in your eye.”

Isn’t there is a certain personal satisfaction in thinking we have won an argument or gotten the last word. I one time witnessed a family dispute where voices were not raised but clearly the goal of each of the two parties was to prove the other wrong. As I tried to back away from this very civil battle the husband turned aside to me and said, “Winning arguments – this is how my family keeps score.”

We should look carefully at what Jesus said and what he does not say. What did he want people to do? Jesus does not say we must agree. He does not say we are to acknowledge to one another that we are miserable sinners, or medium size sinners, or just misunderstood saints. He does not say you are to expect or give an apology. It always bothers me when people in church

demand an apology. Jesus never asked anyone to apologize, no matter how offensive their behavior.

There is no mention of taking sides or debates. He does not say we are to go and tell everyone about what this stupid jerk did. This is not endorsing insults or sarcastic comments. This is not building your self up by tearing someone else down. He does not say we are to list the ways we have been hurt.

There is no call for a vote, or – God help us one and all – no mention of Robert’s Rules of Order. What is the one thing Jesus wanted to achieve? – listening. Jesus said people should listen. That is his goal. Take someone aside and talk with them and if they listen to you and you listen to them then you have achieved your goal as a Christian. Maybe it will take a couple of people to help, maybe a bigger group. The true goal is to listen to one another.

Our goal is not to win or to lose an argument but to achieve reconciliation. A number of years ago I received some advice about conflict I have carried with me ever since. I was working as a chaplain in a psychiatric institute for emotionally disturbed adolescents. The seminar I attended had to do with how to manage conflict with these adolescents who, in addition to raging hormones, had to be diagnosed with having at least two different emotional or behavioral illnesses to be admitted to this hospital.

Serious conflict often occurred. At one point the seminar leader asked those of us who were working with these youth, “If you find yourself in a tug-of-war what is the best way to end the struggle?” The answer was simply, “Let go of the rope.” And that is the end of the tug of war. Just let go of the rope.

The goal is not to control someone but to achieve reconciliation. The kind of in-your-face “You said you were going to help and you lied and did not!” is not going to help reconciliation. Embarrassing or attacking people at a public meeting will never achieve reconciliation. St. Paul expanded on this when he said we should seek to restore someone with a spirit of gentleness.

Jesus said when we cannot resolve a conflict we are to treat people as Gentiles and tax collectors. Jesus had fellowship with Gentiles and tax collectors. He did not treat them as hopelessly lost. He treated them with

gentleness and kindness and kept calling them to follow him. Matthew, the author of this gospel, was a tax collector who followed him.

Jesus gave instructions on how Christians are to deal with differences and conflict. The purpose is not simply to reduce tension but to become a united force in doing the will of a uniting Christ. It is yet another reminder that the teachings of Jesus, the way of Jesus, the will of Jesus, is not something we can achieve alone. It is within the fellowship of others that our faith is tested and our faith is lived.

It is around this table that we in worship reenact what is so often difficult to do in person, to break bread with ally and enemy alike, with those of every political persuasion, with stranger and best friend, with saints and sinner, doubters and believers.

Our power as a church, as God's people, is not in placing blame or in winning arguments. Our power is when we listen to one another and when we gather and work together in the power of Christ's name.