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 Matthew 18:15-20  
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### The Perfect Church

I decided this morning to go back and focus on the other prophets in the Old Testament for the next six weeks. JUST KIDDING!!!

Although if you listened to our New Testament text from Matthew, it too sounded just a bit harsh – don't you think? Kicking someone out of the church because they don't repent? Where's the love?

More on all that later.

While online preparing for the sermon, I came upon a poem entitled, "*The Perfect Church.*"

I don't know who wrote it, but it should sound familiar (at least the context). The poem goes like this:

*I think that I shall never see*

*A church that's all it ought to be;*

*A church whose members never stray*

*Beyond the straight and narrow way!*

*A church that has no empty pews,*

*Whose pastor never has the blues,*

*A church whose elders always seek,*

*And none is proud, and all are meek;*

*Where gossips never peddle lies,*

*Or make complaints and criticize;*

*Where all are always sweet and kind  
And to all others' faults are blind.  
Such perfect churches there may be,  
But none of them are known to me.  
But still we'll work and pray and plan  
To make our own the best we can.*

So, does the poem ring a bell? Personally, I don't know a congregation or a pastor without its problems and challenges, including this one. Do you? Want that list again?

Why is that? Could it have something to do with the fact that even though we are forgiven by God, that all of us still struggle with a self which tends to make us stubborn, selfish, squabblers, sarcastic, sinister, scandalous, and senseless?

As a result, we all tend to experience internal squirmishes within our soul.

And unfortunately, all too often, some people slide down a slippery slope that leads further and further away from the saving grace of our Savior, until finally they enter into a spiritual slumber.

Did you notice all the "s" words I strung together? Did it just for fun.

But, when our fellow brothers or sisters (or ourselves, for that matter) subtly or even not so subtly stray down the primrose path into inappropriate behavior, that can be a problem.

Pastors and directors of music aren't immune. Case in point:

I asked Hugh if I could share this story of a church he served a number of years ago. He assured me I could.

He said that he had a hard time getting along with the minister at the time and apparently the feeling was mutual.

As time went by, this began to spill over into the worship service. The first week the pastor preached on commitment and how we all should dedicate ourselves to the service of God.

Hugh 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.

Hugh led the song, "Jesus Paid it All."

The third week the pastor preached on gossiping and how we should all watch our tongues.

Hugh 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.

To which Hugh had the choir sing the anthem, "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 to the church and it was Jesus who was taking him away.

To which Hugh led the congregation in the hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

Hugh promised me that he would not repeat that behavior here at STHPC!

Which brings us to our passage for this morning from the Gospel of Matthew.

Unfortunately, many Christian communities have been taught that Christians don’t get angry, don’t fight about things, get along perfectly all the time and show up with a smile on their faces every Sunday.

This niceness often masks many problems and conflicts just under the surface.

People allow a buildup to occur, and then they wonder:

“Why did that person leave the church,” or “Why are these people so bitter and resentful,” or “Why did this person quit going to church all together and vow never to come back again?”

Perhaps it occurs because conflicts are never dealt with and time doesn’t necessarily heal the things that are simmering just under the surface.

Our scripture points out how to bring about a greater honesty and genuineness, creating a sincere place where we can be open and honest with one another, not having to hide behind the false security of a smile or constant niceness.

We can be real people within the church and within the world.

What kind of bond would we have with one another if we knew that we wouldn't be condemned and rejected for our faults and sins, but embraced so as to experience reconciliation with the other?

There are many ways of dealing with conflict. One site I visited listed three:

**Peace-faking.** A peace-faker avoids conflict at all cost and behaves like a turtle in a shell. Do you try to escape conflict by acting like everything's OK? Been there, done that.

**Peace-breaking.** These people function more like skunks that spray everything around them when conflict hits. Do you attack when in conflict?

**Peace-making.** This is probably the most difficult because it involves some work. But it is biblical. Peacemakers are willing to candidly discuss conflict and surface sins because it's the way to peace and reconciliation.

See if you can tell which one of those fits this story?

Late one summer evening in Broken Bow, Nebraska, a weary truck driver pulled his rig into an all-night truck stop.

The waitress had just served him when three tough looking, leather jacketed motorcyclists, of the Hell's Angels type, decided to give him a hard time.

Not only did they verbally abuse him, one grabbed the hamburger off his plate, another took a handful of his french fries, and the third picked up his coffee and began to drink it.

So, how do you think he responded? He calmly rose, picked up the check, walked to the front of the room, put the check and his money on the cash register, and walked out the door.

The waitress followed him to put the money in the till, and stood watching out the door as the big truck drove away into the night.

When she returned, one of the bikers said to her, "Well, he's not much of a man, is he?"

To which she replied, "I don't know about that, but he sure ain't much of a truck driver. He just ran over three motorcycles on his way out of the parking lot."

We may laugh at that story, but reality is rarely like that.

Our text from the Gospel of Matthew suggests a better way.

Before going further, let me note the situations that Jesus is NOT talking about here.

He is not speaking, for example, of the situation where your brother does something you don't particularly like.

There are a whole lot of things our brothers and sisters may do which we will not like. That's not what's in view here.

Nor is Jesus talking about someone who is sinning, but not against you.

Nor is Jesus talking about a situation where one of your brothers thinks that YOU are the sinner.

Jesus addresses all of these situations in other parts of scripture. For other sermons...

Instead, in our text, this is what, in affect, Jesus says:

“If your brother or sister sins against you, don’t stand back and wait for that person to come to you first and apologize or say, ‘I’m sorry. I was wrong.’”

Jesus is saying if you see that a conflict has occurred and someone has sinned against you, it is up to you to make the first move.

You see the problem. Maybe the other person isn’t even aware of it at that point.

Jesus is saying to go to the person and point out what has happened between the two of you.

The goal here is to see the problem resolved and the friendship restored, not to cause an angry confrontation.

The problem is that far too often we read the bible with a pair of scissors in our hands.

We cut out the bits we want and keep those and throw the rest away. We read things out of context.

Immediately before this passage is the parable of the lost sheep. Can anyone tell me the parable of the lost sheep?

It's the story of the 99 and the one. Where the shepherd goes out to find the one that was lost.

Immediately after this passage, "If my brother sins against me, how many times should I forgive him? Should I forgive him as many as seven times"

Can anyone remind me about what Jesus's answer was about that?

We'll talk more about that next week – but it was either 77 times or 490 times. Either way, a lot!

C.S. Lewis once said, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive." Isn't that the truth!

We are called to forgive the faults of fellow believers. And the only way we can do that is to remember how much we've been forgiven.

So, it is in this context that Jesus says:

<sup>15</sup> "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one."

The point isn't about finger wagging and telling people off - it's about restoring relationships.

The thing we most commonly do, but the worst possible thing we can do when someone has upset us - is we go and tell EVERYONE else about it.

*{Stage whisper, hand over mouth, mock shock}* Do you know what he did? Do you know what she said?

We talk to the entire community, bar one person. The one person we need to talk to.

Everyone hears about the terrible thing so and so did, or at least about the terrible feud that between me and so and so.

But what does Jesus suggest? Don't go and talk to everyone else. Just go privately and talk to that one person.

After all it may be a misunderstanding. Or they may have perfectly good reasons for what they did, which if you heard would make perfect sense.

Or they may have not understood how much it hurt you. They may just say sorry.

"If the member listens to you, you have regained that one"

Jesus's language is all about reconciliation.

The process of reconciliation is made easier by the knowledge that God is with us if we come together in his name during the process.

God is with us whenever two or three are gathered together in his name.

God sustains us even when there is no hope. When we turn to the deepest center of our hearts, we will find God and hope will spring forth.

Christ is in our midst working to achieve the same goal. He is the ultimate peacekeeper and peacemaker.

Jesus isn't interested in who is right or who is wrong. He only cares about getting a broken relationship fixed.

Our concerns about who is right and who is wrong often lead to giving up on relationships with others.

Almost 115 years ago a large statue of Christ was erected high in the Andes on the border between Argentina and Chile as a symbol of a peaceful resolution of a border dispute between the two countries.

The statue is called Christ the Redeemer of the Andes and is constructed of cannons that were used in war. The statue serves as a pledge that there will be peace between Chile and Argentina.

Shortly after it was erected, the Chileans began to protest that they had been slighted because the statue had its back to Chile.

As tempers were high and tension was thick, a newspaper editorial in Chile saved the day with these words: "It's OK. The people of Argentina need more watching over than the Chileans."

Those wise words, combined with some humor, took the heat off.

We never want to get to the point where church discipline has to step in. Thankfully, we have never had to deal with something like that. But even if we did, it would be to encourage reconciliation.

Some of you might have heard of a country song entitled, "Anyway."

It reminds us of how we are to treat each other as Christians, and it also sums up how and why Jesus wants us to resolve conflicts.

I'd like to share some of its words as I close my message.

*People are illogical, unreasonable and self-centered ... Love them anyway.*

*If you are good, people will accuse you of ulterior motives ... Do good anyway.*

*Honesty and frankness will make you vulnerable ... Be honest and frank anyway.*

*People really need help, but may attack you if you help them ... Help them anyway.*

*In the final analysis, it's between you and God ... It was never between you and them anyway.*

The late Canadian politician Jack Layton put it another way in the last letter that he wrote before he died.

He wrote, "My friends, love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So, let us be loving and optimistic, and we'll change the world".

If we remember his words and the words of Jesus, especially when we are in conflict with our fellow brother or sister, we will change the world.

Loving our neighbor fulfills any and every other divine command, for genuine love does no harm to its neighbor.

May we remember that and live it every day.

*Amen!*