

Today's worship and sermon continue our focus on the Grace Covenant around which our congregation gathers. Today, we consider our commitment "to follow Matthew's order of discipline for reconciliation in conflict, seeking to regain our brother or sister through open and direct communication instead of gossip and condemnation."

It began, innocently enough, with a question: "Who's the greatest?" Unlike Mark, who sets the question in the middle of an apostolic squabble, Matthew just puts it out there, actually giving it an air of respectability by adding the words "in the kingdom of heaven." Maybe Matthew, who had been around a decade or so longer and the only Gospel writer to actually use the word "church," recognized how inescapable the question was. Maybe he had lived long enough to witness the celebration over the winning of a few prize converts, coveted individuals of wealth and influence, who, after all, could be a great help to the church and its mission. Maybe he, like Paul, had observed "love" feasts in which those of means did indeed feast while those with meager resources were left hungry. Perhaps he had seen cataclysmic divisions opening up in the church, not unlike those Paul had witnessed in Corinth; and, again like Paul, perhaps he had observed the day to day disputes that plagued the church's existence, ending either with someone leaving the church or a church so weakened by inner turmoil that it had little to contribute to the world of turmoil which surrounded it. However much Matthew had seen, he had seen enough to know that this question on the lips of Jesus' disciples could so rock Christ's church as to capsize it.

If we are honest, we will acknowledge Matthew's and Jesus' insight into the nature of the church and the nature of every human relationship that matters. The issue of who matters most begins from the cradle in sibling rivalry and, if left unresolved, can leave in its wake a lifetime of broken hearts and broken relationships.

How do we get our priorities straight? How do we get ourselves above the fray long enough to get in touch with a source of strength and wholeness that will enable us to put away our childish striving and become the Body of Christ in reality as well as in name?

***The value we place upon others is measured by the value God in Christ places upon them.*** Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Who has status in Christ's church? Our instrument of measure is determined by the example and teachings of Jesus. As he has done on so many other occasions, Jesus answers the question in parable. Pointing the child, Jesus calls his church, not just to humility, but to the radical overthrow of all of the world's systems of exclusion. Those so easily dismissed in any society as inconsequential are Jesus' beloved "little ones." Anyone who welcomes them welcomes him.

Jesus moves then to the parable of ninety and nine: "If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?" Actually, in terms of the practice of the day, "No." The idea would have been shocking to anyone in the audience who knew anything about tending sheep. As was often the case with his parables, Jesus' departure from convention jolted his hearers to full attention, here underscoring the great value God places upon these little ones and the great length to which God will go to see to it that not "one of these little ones should be lost."

The context in which *Luke* tells the story makes it appear that the sheep for which the shepherd searches is the "sinner" or tax collector *outside* the fold. As Matthew tells the story, on the other hand, the sheep seems to be one from inside the church who "has gone astray." Matthew proceeds immediately into what we have labeled "the order of church discipline." Too often it has been regarded as the proof text for getting rid of trouble makers in the church—this, only because its careful, pastoral, step-by-step process is dissociated from the stated concern of Jesus from which it proceeds: that not "one of these little ones should be lost."

In our Grace Covenant we promise to follow Matthew's order of discipline for reconciliation in conflict, a three step process of direct communication with one who, Matthew says, has "sinned" or has "sinned against us"—ancient manuscripts support both readings. We abuse scripture and our covenant, however, if we treat the process as little more than "three strikes and you're out." The goal, acknowledged up front in both Matthew and our covenant, is a concerted effort to "regain our brother or sister." The process is not about papering over rude, irritable or sinful behavior because such behavior takes its toll on the Body of Christ. The process is about open and honest and direct communication. Much on the order of counselors David and Vera Mace's approach to marital conflict, it acknowledges a rising problem and rising anger and says, "I love you. I don't want to be angry with you. Please help me." And two people or both sides of the conflict move seriously to seek resolution.

The very fact that the process Jesus spells out contains four conditional clauses—"if another sins," "if he does not listen," "if he ignores" the two or three you take on a second attempt to seek resolution, "if he ignores even the church"—is indicative of the fact that Matthew knows the process may indeed fail. We should not, however, be too quick to assume that Jesus' pronouncement "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" gives us permission to close the door upon a person. In light of the gospel, Gentiles and tax collectors become the occasion for evangelism, not rejection.

**Ours is the story of grace.** Shortly after moving to Oak Ridge twenty years ago, we traveled to Columbia, South Carolina, so that Larry could perform my niece's wedding. Some ten years later my niece gave birth to her first child. Sharon later shared with me the story behind the name she chose for her daughter. After ten years of disappointment,

she recognized her little girl as a gift of sheer grace. Today, Grace is a beautiful little girl who lives up to her name and the joy and meaning to which it gives expression.

That, Matthew is saying, is the very nature of the Body of Christ. Within the same context of answering the disciples' question about greatness in the kingdom of heaven, he relates Jesus' answer to Peter's question, "How often should I forgive?" with the extravagant "seventy times seven" and proceeds then to relate a parable unique to his gospel alone. Again, he speaks in hyperbole: A servant owes his master "10,000 talents," an enormous sum of money, equivalent to a hundred million working days of pay for a day laborer. Forgiven of this enormous debt, he then turns to have a servant who owes him one-millionth as much into prison. "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave," the angry master demands, "as I had mercy on you?"

And thus the answer to the disciples' question: Who is greatest in the kingdom of God? The individual and the community that practices forgiveness. The individual and community that knows it has received grace beyond measure. Such a community exudes gratitude. Such a community is a happy place to be. It is a place of real depth of relationship where people are invested in one another and in the community they are building together. It is not just a place to drop into occasionally. It is at the center of life and meaning. The grace that people find there emanates meaning to every other aspect of their lives. Work? Yes. Family. Yes. Community responsibilities? Yes.

It isn't about domination. It's about being reminded day by day and week by week and one season of life after another about the nature of the ground beneath our feet. God was in Christ, Paul says, reconciling the world to God's self. Christ, as the esteemed theologian Karl Barth put it, was God's "Yes" to God's children. We live from that grace and extend that grace to one another and to the world in which we live. Thanks be to God!