

“The Demands of Love”

How do we live in community? That’s the question that is raised by today’s Gospel. It becomes all that more acute a question when you reflect on what M. Scott Peck wrote in his book, The People of the Lie:

“It is not their sins per se that characterize evil people, rather it is the subtlety and persistence and consistency of their sins. This is because the central defect of the evil is not the sin but the refusal to acknowledge it. Evil, then, is most often committed in order to scapegoat, . . . In other words, the evil attack others instead of facing their own failures . . . Unfortunately, forgiveness and reconciliation is not always our primary motive in dealing with others. Sometimes anger and revenge take over.”

We all sin; but evil begins to take shape when we ignore our sins, excuse our sins, keep on sinning, and have no thought about reconciliation. Jesus talks about what that reconciliation means and how we gain it: ***“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.”*** Jesus is speaking about what goes on between Christians; this just flat out doesn’t work with unbelievers.

Jesus begins with those times when the sin is against you, Jesus tells us to talk one-on-one . . . alone! But Wayne Weissenbuehler (is that a name!) writes: *“When we have been wronged, we usually don’t confront the person. Instead, we go and tell two or three or more of our friends, ‘Do you know what so-and-so did to me?’ Jesus did not say: ‘Go tell everybody what that stupid jerk did to you.’ Jesus told us: ‘Go and talk to that stupid jerk about the hurtful actions.’”*

“If the member listens to you, you have regained that one,” Jesus tells us. This is why He tells us to do it this way: to be reconciled; not just to spout off. It is not to air all our grievances; it is not to vent; it is not to tell them off; it is certainly not to “win” — it is to ***“regain that one.”*** When your goal is reconciliation, not winning, when the motivation is love not selfish gain, it changes the entire process.

Jesus goes on: ***“But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”*** What’s the deal with these witnesses? It was required under Jewish law, so that no one person could maliciously make an unfounded accusation (but Jesus is rarely concerned about that kind of legal wrangling) Rather, Jesus gives this instruction to ensure the integrity of the process; and (perhaps this is the more important point), when necessary, *to identify me as the jerk.*

Here I have been fussing and fuming about what she did, what he said, how they treated me . . . and all the time it was my faulty perception of what was going on causing the problem. I learned what she did from a third party, who gave me bad information, or maybe even wanted just to stir up trouble (naw, that never happens!) I misinterpreted what it was he said, or I never heard it correctly in the first place. I took their behavior toward me as some kind of aggression or mistreatment, when it was offered as a caring gesture.

The witnesses are there to listen to ***“every word,”*** Jesus says, and to help those thus engaged to a) be truthful; and b) be honest (those are sometimes different things; if I keep inside something that is hitting at me, I may be truthful — I did not lie — but I was not honest).

Okay, but what if the witnesses confirm that you have a legitimate grievance, and the other person refuses to be reconciled? In that case, Jesus says: ***“If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”***

We tend to take that to mean: treat him or her like an outcast (in the Amish community, this is called “shunning” . . . it is also practiced among the Jehovah’s Witnesses . . . it’s a bad deal). Take note how Jesus treated ***“Gentiles and tax collectors”*** — He welcomed them, ate with them, taught them, cared for them. They were still outsiders, but all that means is that one has to work just that much more intensely to regain them as insiders.

Buried in all of this is the premise that can be summed up in a single (albeit compound) sentence: *“I am accountable to you; I am responsible for me.”* This is often where we run afoul.

All too often, we want to act as the “morals police” and tell others how they should be living (elsewhere Jesus ridiculed that as trying to remove a speck with a log sticking out of your eye). The simple fact is: you cannot control how I behave; nor should you have to: I am responsible for me.

But in community I am accountable to you. We have this covenant (that’s what living in community is all about), and it says we shall act toward one another in certain ways and avoid acting toward each other in other ways. So I won’t kick you when you’re down; instead I will help you to get up. I won’t spread false rumors about you (so does that mean I can spread all the true rumors? No!); I will defend you in every way that I can. I won’t let you wander off aimlessly; I will seek to bring you back into fellowship.

You can’t make me do that; but you can call me on it — because by virtue of being in community together we are accountable to one another for how we treat one another.

Here’s the awesome power we wield in community: ***“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”*** There has been an interesting and ongoing discussion online regarding how we are to understand what Jesus is saying here. Old Testament scholars hear these words of Jesus and they echo with all kinds of rabbinic undertones. When the rabbis taught that one could bind or loose another person, they were talking about how you deal with someone in the context of what was going on. In other words, you do not begin with absolutes. *“Oh boy!”* someone will moan, *“Here we go with situational ethics. Everything is approved because there are no moral absolutes.”* No, the argument is not that there are no absolutes, it is that you don’t begin there . . . your first line of address is not *“It’s against the rules!”*

Every parent knows why you don't begin there — because the inevitable comeback is “*Why?*” “*Why is that against the rules?*” and the only retort to that is “*Because!*” or the expanded version: “*Because I said so!*” End of discussion? Hardly. It may momentarily silence the exchange, but you know full well, this issue is coming up again. So you begin with: What's going on? Why is this important? What will be gained by doing this? What might get lost, damaged, destroyed? Where is love at work in this?

One of the things that kept coming up in the online discussion was the fact that Luther understood these words of our Lord to apply to granting or withholding forgiveness. Eventually any discussion about love does get down to what forgiveness is all about.

Unforgiveness is such a huge deal because it has temporal and eternal consequences. Temporal, because we carry all this crap around. I firmly believe that a lot of the emotional problems people deal with are a direct consequence of unforgiveness. Stuff gets buried because it was never dealt with lovingly — so grudges and resentments get formed, become set, harden into a form of hatred . . . and this eats away at the person who has denied forgiveness. When we hold back forgiveness, it is often with an attitude of “*I'll show her!*” while she remains blissfully unaware that there even is a problem. There are eternal consequences because, when we don't forgive, we condemn a person. We tell that person, “*You cannot have the forgiveness Christ came to provide.*”

Which brings us to two of the most inappropriately applied passages of the Bible.

The first is: “. . . *truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.*” Many see this as a mechanism — got an issue? Get two or three others who agree with you, pray about it, and “*Voila!*” you got it! In this model God is duty-bound to give what you ask.

Please note the context Jesus sets: this is all about the reconciliation model — moving toward agreement. This is not about “*generating*

spiritual power to get things accomplished” This is about coming together in community where discord and brokenness had existed and finding full agreement.

Similarly, the second inappropriately applied passage is: “... *where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*” People make it sound as if Jesus has established a quorum. So let’s run the church on the basis of Robert’s Rules (some do!). If you read it that way, then it also seems to say that Jesus is not present when you’re alone.

Once again, this is tied into this reconciliation model. When is it the hardest to recognize the presence of Christ? It is when I am angry with you. That’s why Jesus wants to keep reminding us: “*I am here.*” So when I am hurt, or angry, or plotting my revenge — it is Jesus who comes to stand among us, so that my anger and hurt feelings are not what comes between us; His loving presence fills that gap.

Too many times I have heard people say that they simply cannot forgive another. I will admit that in the throes of a problem — when the wound is fresh — it is hard to move toward that other person (except maybe to bop him!) The love of Jesus can, in time, bring the healing we need. But so often we fight that call to forgive . . . because we really don’t understand what forgiveness is (or we confuse it with what it is not).

Forgiveness . . . is not pretending that what happened didn’t happen; it is not excusing away the other’s behavior; it is not setting yourself up to get hurt some more; it is not glossing over the pain with “it doesn’t matter.”

When we have been hurt by another — physically, emotionally, spiritually, relationally — it does matter. It cannot be excused away. It cannot be made to disappear by pretending it did not happen. It most certainly cannot be allowed to be repeated to add to the pain.

Forgiveness is saying: “*I have a right to revenge. In any fair universe and system, I have an absolute right to seek my revenge. But I give up that right in the name of Jesus. I turn that right over to Jesus to let Him deal with that person who has hurt me.*”

“I cannot forgive,” can mean, *“Right now, I’m just hurting too badly to get there.”* But, alas, it can also mean, *“I want my revenge. I don’t know how or where or when, but I want it.”* Without forgiveness, however, life becomes an unending series of bouts of revenge — all you need to do is look at the Middle East to see how holding on to old injuries plays out centuries down the road with built-in consuming hatred, prejudices, and all-out warfare.

Jesus calls us — demands from us — something more. That “more” is a deep sense of community, of belonging to one another. Whenever our thinking devolves into me/you, or us/them, we will resist true community.

A young rabbi found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said or did moved toward solving the impasse. Finally, in desperation, the young rabbi sought out the synagogue's 99-year-old founder. He met the old rabbi in the nursing home and poured out his troubles. *“So tell me,”* he pleaded, *“was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?”* *“No,”* answered the old rabbi. *“Ah,”* responded the younger man, *“then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?”* *“No,”* answered the old rabbi. *“Well,”* the young rabbi responded, *“what we have is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream.”* *“Ah,”* said the old man, *“that was the tradition.”*

Jesus knew that we would hold on to “old stuff” and continue to be burdened by the aftermath of unforgiveness. So get rid of the “old stuff” If you have caused an injury, go to the one you have injured, repent, and be reconciled. If you have been injured, go to the one who has injured you, talk it through, and be reconciled. It should be noted: Nowhere in these verses is there any hint that Jesus leaves this as a option.

Our present emotional health and our eternal welfare are at stake when we fail to forgive. Love demands that we take the effort to do so — and do so at once. Amen.