

Sermon: Pentecost 14

The Rev. Kim Hoop

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Year A

Ezekiel 33:7-11

Psalm 119:33-40

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

"If the offender refuses to listen even to the church let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." In other words an outsider.

Wow! was this Gospel reading today Jesus's brand of tough love? Three strikes and you're out? Well lets take a look? There are 3 steps.

First the accuser and the offender were to meet, listen (really listen) and discuss the offense and work towards reconciliation, if no luck, the accuser brings in two-three witnesses, if the offender continues to dig in their heels and refuses to repent, reconcile and make behavior changes, the accuser takes it to the church. If the offender is still unrepentant and won't come around the church then considers the offender an outcast.

This is known today as excommunication from the church.

These are a powerful set of instructions from Jesus and they are not new. They have been found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and were in effect in the Qumran community to which John the Baptist was thought to belong.

So why did Jesus give these instructions, what was their purpose?

The so called "churches" in Jesus's time were not Christian Churches like the one we are in, they were small communities of believers. The people lived, worked and worshiped near one another. Or, according to some sources, the church may have been a reference to the local synagogue.

I remember when I worked in the mountains of West Virginia. In the small towns in those mountains, people lived closely together, worked in the area and at the end of main street was the local church and community center. Everyone knew each other and most people were friendly to even outsiders.

My guess is that towns in Jesus' time were much the same. Homes were clustered near a water supply, and fertile land for farming or grazing. Buildings would have been in close proximity for protection from invaders.

In these communities people had to get along, and most likely people knew one another. Jesus wanted his followers to live and worship with one another in love, caring for one another and those in need. Conflict was inevitable and Jesus knew that, but it was how conflict is dealt with and resolved that was important to Christ. His followers were to live according to his example and teaching and conflicts were to be resolved in a firm but loving way. This would serve to keep the community together, functioning as one," the body of Christ."

But, perhaps Jesus's tough love approach had a kinder, gentler side. It is difficult at best to confront someone who has wronged another. It needs to be done firmly but with love and a sense of humility. It was important in Jewish culture to confront someone privately so they could make amends and avoid embarrassment and shame. It also involved reconciliation, which could include making restitution. If someone swipes another persons prize goat, they may have to return the goat, replace the goat or pay for the goat. But...

"The role of the accuser was not to be one of self righteousness, demanding their pound of flesh, resorting to legalism or manipulation of the offender." It was to be done with humility . All accusers have at some time in their lives been offenders too and were forgiven, especially by Jesus. Forgiveness is a big piece of the process, especially on

the part of the accuser and important to remember. As we all have been at some time, in our lives been both, offenders and accusers ... and forgiven.

As children growing up, my younger brother and I were masters at the art of teasing, taunting and getting one another in trouble. You know, mom...he's making faces at me again. Dad, she's kicking me under the table. And so forth. There was no private discussion, we went right to the top, going for blood. But Jesus was referring to offenses far beyond the teasing of childhood. Sins and offenses like, lying, slander and adultery had to be addressed and dealt with in a systematic, fair way in order to maintain a community. And the goal was regaining the individual, not displacing them. This reminds me of the Good Shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to look for one lost sheep, to bring him back into the sheep fold. Punishment was not necessarily the prime focus either. It was repentance and behavior change so the the community as a whole was not harmed and disrupted.

In the second directive the purpose of the 2-3 witnesses, lent support to both parties."The witnesses were not there to pronounce guilt, or coerce the offender into anything," they were not allies to either the offender or the accuser and may not even have been eye witnesses. They may also have been there as a reminder that the offense that had been committed was serious and needed attention.

Once the offender got as far as the Church, it was made clear that the offense was very serious and removal was a real possibility if changes weren't made on the part of the offender. Most sources indicated that even if the person was put out of the church, there was always the possibility that they could return to the community if changes were made. Sometimes letting the person go is the only solution, if nothing else has worked and Jesus allowed for that course of action.

As St. Paul said, the Body of Christ is made up of many members or parts and all are equally important in the eyes of God. The goal was keeping everyone in the community,

as their absence fractured the stability of that community. And all of the described steps were done prayerfully. Jesus had promised that if 2-3 are gathered in his name he will be in the midst of them."The Church took this seriously and felt that any decisions made with prayer were in accordance with God and that he was present in the decision making."

So how is all of this relevant today? I wonder if instead of calling it tough love, Jesus was putting forth the idea of unconditional love. For those of you who are parents you know first hand how difficult this can be. Love the offender but not the offense. Yet, holding those involved accountable for their actions. Not all behaviors are acceptable.

It is difficult to hear criticism and I would venture to guess that most of us, myself included, are much better at formulating a devastating retort that will cut the accuser to the quick, rather than admit to wrong doing. Justifying our words and actions as only we can do. Not so fast says Jesus, self examination, and acknowledging our mistakes is necessary for reconciliation and forgiveness, which is thought to happen on a spiritual level thru prayer and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

I think some things that should garner confrontation in our larger communities today include: bullying, racism and hatred towards those who are different. Whether it is different in religious beliefs, skin color, nationality or sexual orientation, hatred has no place in any community, or house of worship. But lets not forget our smaller communities, our families, our church and our jobs. Blowing up in anger, treating family members badly, walking off the job or leaving the church with out any attempt to deal with the issues, solves nothing. Unconditional love that is put forth by members of a community does not mean that anyone is a doormat, but rather someone who is not afraid to tackle the hard issues, and can see beyond the sins, offenses, and barriers that we all put up and commit and who work for reconciliation and accountability and can see all people for who we are... children of God.

And I found some words of wisdom from Mother Theresa... "People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway. If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway. If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway. What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway. If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway. The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway. Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway. In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway."

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