

*Are You Building Bridges or Building Walls?*

Matthew 18:15-20

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**While strolling through the park, a pastor struck up a conversation with a soap salesman. They soon began to talk about religion. The soap salesman made an observation: “The Gospel you preach doesn’t seem to have done much good after two thousand years,” he said. “There is still a lot of evil and wickedness in the world.”**

**The pastor thought for a moment, then he pointed to a little boy making mud pies. The child was exceedingly dirty. “I can see that soap hasn’t done much good either. It’s been around for a long time but there are still a lot of dirty hands and faces.”**

**“That’s true,” said the soap salesman, “but soap is effective only when it’s applied.”**

**To which the pastor smiled and said, “So it is with the gospel.”**

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**It’s true, isn’t it? The gospel is only as effective as those who apply it to their lives. It’s one thing to hear the words of Jesus and nod**

**our heads in affirmation; it's another thing altogether to take the words of Jesus and put them to use in our lives. Our salvation comes to us free, but our discipleship comes to us only through a significant investment of our selves. The texts with which we will deal today and next Sunday are examples of the kind of personal investment and sacrifice that it takes to be faithful disciples. They deal with the aspect of our discipleship that is perhaps the most difficult, yet also the most crucial: forgiveness.**

**Jesus' teaching in this morning's text from the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, at least at first glance, almost sounds like advice on how to get rid of a troublemaker in the church. After all, if someone persistently refuses to listen to reason, that person should be expelled from the fellowship.**

**But excommunication is not the goal of Jesus' teaching. If you will look at the verses that precede this morning's text, you will find Jesus telling a parable of a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep behind just to go and find the one lost sheep, so that the one lost sheep can be restored to the flock. And then in the verses that follow this morning's lesson, verses we will treat next Sunday, Jesus says that it is not**

**enough to forgive someone seven times, but up to seventy times seven times.**

**So you see, when you look at this morning's text in the greater context of the chapter in which it falls, Jesus is not so much concerned with expulsion from the Christian fellowship as he is concerned with the restoration of relationships within the Christian fellowship. Jesus recognizes that there will be differences between Christians. Jesus acknowledges that even the redeemed will still bring hurt and disappointment upon each other from time to time.**

**The critical thing is to address the issue head on, to deal with it forthrightly. Bill Hybels has noted that the mark of Christian community, that is true biblical unity, is not the absence of conflict but the presence of a reconciling spirit. And in this morning's text, Jesus offers some very practical advice on how to make sure we're about the business of reconciling and repairing broken relationships within the body of Christ.**

**More than anything else, Jesus instructs us to be direct with one another. "If a fellow Christian sins against you, go and show them their fault, just between the two of you," he says.<sup>1</sup> If that doesn't work, says**

**Jesus, then take a couple of folks with you and confront the offender again. If that still doesn't work, then take up the matter to the whole church; if even that doesn't make the person listen to reason, then you need to throw that person out.**

**What Jesus tells us to do is exactly the opposite from what most of us would think of doing. It is our tendency to avoid confrontation. We would rather talk *about* someone who has hurt us than talk *to* them face to face. And besides, shouldn't the offending person be the one to take the initiative? Why does it have to be the person who was hurt who has to get the ball rolling? And when was the last time that you took some friends to gang up on someone who had done you wrong, much less have a public hearing in church about someone's wrongdoing?!**

**But that is exactly what Jesus tells us to do. And in so doing, Jesus shows us how important it is to strive for reconciliation between feuding Christians. It is important for the sake of the health of the Christian family, the body of Christ. And it is important for the sake of our witness to the centrality of forgiveness in the gospel; we need to act redeemed if we're going to provide a convincing witness for our**

**Redeemer. The alternative will end up giving our Christian witness a black eye: Unresolved issues become concentric circles, taking in families and friends, and threaten to infect the whole congregation. A small rift will become a chasm. People who worshipped alongside one another will quickly find it difficult to share the sanctuary. Trust will erode and suspicion will grow like mold in an untended shower stall. More energy is spent in preserving hostility and unforgiveness than in shared mission and proclamation of the gospel.<sup>2</sup>**

**And that's exactly why the words of Jesus are so important. The body of Christ cannot afford to let conflict and hurt go unchecked.**

**Really, the solution pretty simple. The key to reconciliation and resolution of differences, if you will look closely, is open, honest communication. Jesus speaks of personal, direct communication and sensitive listening.**

**It might surprise you, but I'm not perfect. Either by things I have said or done or not done, I have on occasion hurt someone's feelings. It's not my intent to hurt others, but sometimes it happens. One time I failed to respond to someone who had been going through a difficult time. Several weeks went by, and even though I thought about that**

**person, I didn't make the personal contacts that I should have made. Finally, that person confronted me and told me how my inaction had the effect of communicating to them that I didn't care. I could've offered up any of a thousand excuses about how busy I had been, about how my attention had been diverted in other directions. But instead, I took a deep breath and said, "You are right. I was wrong. I hope you'll forgive me."**

**You see, more important than bolstering my own case was the repairing of a broken relationship. Instead of trying to win an argument, it was more important for me to win back a friend. The person who had been hurt came and told me so. And the best thing I could do was to listen, and to admit I was wrong, and to ask for forgiveness.**

**Open, honest communication. That's what Jesus is calling us to do. When a fellow Christian has hurt you, don't let the hurt fester. Don't go first to others and make accusations against the one who has hurt you. First go and, person to person, face to face, share the hurt that has been caused. And if you are the person who has hurt someone else, listen. Don't get defensive. Don't try to make excuses. Listen, and**

**try to understand how your words or actions might have caused pain to the other person.**

**And ask forgiveness. The only win-win solution is when forgiveness is sought and given. When someone has hurt us, we need to be about the business of building bridges, not building walls.**

**Once there were two brothers who lived on adjoining farms. There came a point when there was a very large rift between them. It began with a small misunderstanding, and grew into a major difference, and finally exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence.**

**One morning, there was a knock on the older brother's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days' work," said the man. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here that I could help with?"**

**"Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my younger brother! Last week, there was a meadow between us, but he took his bulldozer and dug a small river between us. Well I'm going to do him one better. See that**

**pile of old lumber? I want you to build an 8 foot high fence between us. Then I won't need to see his place or his face anymore."**

**The carpenter said, "Show me the nails and the tools, and I'll do a good job for you."**

**The older brother had to go to town, so he left for the day. At sunset, when he returned, his eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. The carpenter had built a bridge that stretched from one side of the river to the other, with handrails and all! And his younger brother was coming toward them, his hand outstretched. "You're quite the guy," he said, "after all I've said and done."**

**The two brothers met in the middle and embraced. They turned to see the carpenter leaving. "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother.**

**"I'd love to," the carpenter said, "but I have more bridges to build."**

**In Christ, the dividing wall of hostility has come crumbling down. As his disciples, you and I are called to demonstrate to the world just what redemption and reconciliation looks like.**

**When you have been hurt, are you better at building walls or  
bridges?**

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 18:15. The Bible says “brother,” but the sense is that it is a fellow Christian.

<sup>2</sup> Rick Williamson, Lectionary Homiletics, September 1999, p. 5.