

Radical Love in a Risky World
“Radical Love is Reconciling”
Matthew 18:15-19

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To live above with those we love, well, that will be glory. To live below with those we know, well, that's another story.

That's what this sermon is about today. Wherever two or more people come together in relationships deeper than a casual “hello,” conflict is bound to follow. In Matthew 18, Jesus gives a teaching about conflict resolution. While it is spoken to the Church, it has applications for all situations. So if another person sins against you, if there is conflict, if you can't work it out, according to Jesus, here is what you do:

DEAL WITH IT. *“Go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.”* Or as Eugene Peterson makes it more personal, “If he listens, you have gained a friend.” I like that phase. Most of the time, it is settled here.

The story immediately preceding this teaching is the story of the one lost sheep. You remember it. There were ninety-nine sheep safe in the fold, out of the wind and the cold, but one strayed away to the mountains bare, far from the shepherd's care. What does the shepherd do? He leaves the ninety-nine to search for the one lost sheep. As we used to sing in our little country church a long time ago:

None of the ransomed ever knew,
How deep were the waters crossed;
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed
through,
Till he found his sheep that was lost.

About twelve years ago, I visited Rick Warren at Saddleback Church out in Orange County, California. Rick was still holding services in a tent back then. During a seminar I asked Rick this question, “How do you handle drop-outs at Saddleback?” Humorously, Rick responded, “I wave good-bye.” Who am I to debate Rick Warren? But, it seems to me, this teaching calls for something more. The word is not “GOOD-BYE,” but “GO.”

Go in Person. Some of us will do almost anything to avoid conflict. We will run from it, pout about it, pretend it is not there. Such action seldom settles anything. If we cannot run from it, we tend to write about it. We send a letter or an e-mail. I believe if Jesus was living in the twenty-first century, he would add a new addition to the Lord's Prayer. It would go like this: “Forgive us our e-mails as we forgive those who send e-mails to us.” Communication is much more than getting something off our chests in the middle of the night without time to even

think about it. Remember the delete key on your computer is there for a reason. Use it every chance that you can.

Go in Peace. The purpose of the meeting is not vindication and judgment, but understanding and reconciliation. The ancient philosopher Zeno said, "We are endowed with two ears and one mouth, as a constant reminder that we need to listen twice as much as we speak". Paul said so many times and in so many ways in all of his letters, but in particular in Colossians. 3:12, "*Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness,...forgive grievances you have against one another.*" In conflict, no matter where it happens to be, you deal with it.

GET SOME HELP. In Verse 16 of Matthew, we read, "*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. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the Church.*"

Mediation can make a difference. Law demanded it. In Deuteronomy 19:15, we read, "*Matters must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.*" Reason requires it. We need mediators because in most every disagreement there is "Your truth," "My truth," and "The real truth." It is very difficult for any of us to be objective when we are emotionally and personally involved. Passion can cloud perspective. The more assertive we are by nature the harder it becomes to admit we are wrong. So many of us hold on to trivial truth long after the point has been made. Mediation is hard work. Mediators need the patience of Job, the wisdom of Solomon, the perseverance of Paul, and the hide of a rhinoceros.

The Church has a role. Taking it to the church is more than turning prayer meetings into gossip sessions and the parking lot into rumor mills. God save us from that. If the church is a community of faith, if there are ties that bind us together enough to share each others woes, and bear each others burdens, then breaks in the body call us to prayer, confession, and discernment. Let us never forget that all prayers begin with "Our Father." The same God who loves us, loves them too.

LET IT GO. Verse 17b says, "*If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*"

For the Amish, The Jehovah Witnesses, the Church of Scientology and others, this Scripture is used to justify the practice of shunning.

Shunning is the act of deliberately avoiding association with and habitually keeping away from an individual or group who has broken church rules. It is excommunication with a personal twist. It takes being "kicked out" to an emotional extreme. Even a scene on the TV show *Grey's Anatomy* the other night dealt with the problem of an ill Amish daughter being shunned.

Treat them as Gentiles and tax collectors. Let's probe deeper. Most of us are Gentiles. How does Jesus treat us? Matthew, who wrote this book, was a tax collector. How did Jesus treat him? Jesus said in Matthew 21:31 that tax

collectors will enter the kingdom before orthodox religious people. How are we told to treat even our enemies? We should treat them with respect, as children of God, people for whom Christ died.

The point is this, it takes one person to forgive. It takes two persons to reconcile. We are not in charge of the actions and attitudes of others. To be so would be an act of control, not an act of love.

I remember the first time a family left a church I served because I was too conservative, or too liberal, or too something to please them. I agonized over it for months; I was threatened by their rejection. I was angered by their revenge. Finally, one day, the Holy Spirit said to me, "Get over it." If everyone didn't follow Jesus why should you think everyone would follow you? That's grandiosity to the ultimate degree. So I have learned over the years to agree to disagree and move on without holding a grudge.

I heard a country song the other day entitled, "Anyway." It reminded me of something I've used for years. It goes like this:

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.
Amen.