

If Your Brother Sins Against You

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 18: 15-20

Delivered on September 6, 2020

A friend of mine, a fellow pastor was in a certain church at one point in her ministry. Now, this was not a Presbyterian church, so they didn't have a Session, they had what they called a council. And about six months into her ministry, the council called a special meeting and said they wanted to tell her how things are going. It was an evaluation of sorts, and to be clear, they tried to be fair. They wanted to be sure they said nice things to this new pastor, and they did. They talked about the qualities they liked about her. They liked her preaching for example and her bible studies. And since she had come aboard, church pledges had increased and even a few people had joined and they liked these things, too. But then they got down to the things she had done wrong. She said something in a sermon some months ago that a person who didn't want to be named didn't like, and this person took offense to it. She was also addressing the choir one time and she said something another person thought was cold and heartless but this person didn't want to be named either. And then finally one time she was meeting with the deacons and she called one of the deacons by the wrong name, and this person was hurt by that, but they also didn't want to come forward. And so they went on and on with all these transgressions, a long list of things their new pastor had done wrong in the past six months, in complaints that no one said anything about at the time, in complaints which no one would attach a name to. Well, this new pastor was traumatized by this whole event, and she was gone from the church within a year. The council did not understand why. The things they said about her weren't all bad. They had plenty of nice things to say about her and no one can expect that

everything they do is perfect. Naturally people are going to make some mistakes. And so the council just said to themselves this new pastor of ours must just not be open to any criticism.

But what the council didn't understand is that the pastor felt that this was an ambush. Not only was she having her mistakes aired out in front of the whole council, but she was completely caught off guard by them. Furthermore, most of these incidents were things that took place so long ago she wouldn't have been able to remember the details even if she knew the names of the people involved, and since she didn't know the names of the people involved what could she possibly say about them? And finally these things that were said about her were being allowed to fester and grow. If she had truly done something to hurt someone, they needed to say something about it then and there so there could be an opportunity for apology and forgiveness. But when nothing is said about these things they grow into resentments and grudges.

I have no doubt that the council who met with this person meant well. But what they did left such a bad taste in this new pastor's mouth that no matter how they meant things, it ruined things. And tragically, it didn't have to be that way. In the Presbyterian Church, we are people of the Reformed tradition, and as people of the Reformed tradition, one of the things we believe is that all of us sin. Every one of us is a sinner. But as sinners we are also called to live together in community in the church and that will inevitably mean that sometimes when we sin we will sin against each other. Even the best of us will do that. We will say things that are unkind or we will forget about each other when we shouldn't, or we will take our anger out on each other. We will be inconsiderate of each other and sometimes even less than honest with each other. I could of course go on and on. So what do we do in these cases? Well, here's

what's interesting about today's gospel passage. Sometimes when Jesus talks in the bible you may think he doesn't always give the clearest message. And so he'll say something like the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed or he'll tell a story about a man going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and you say to yourself what on earth does that mean? It is not always easy to know what Jesus is telling us when he sometimes talks in metaphors and stories. But today, his instructions couldn't be more specific, and they couldn't be clearer, and how sad it is that that well-meaning council in my friend's case didn't even bother to read these instructions, because had they read them, they could have easily avoided all the hurt feelings that came out of that unfortunate meeting with my friend.

When we read this gospel lesson today, we hear Jesus say if another member of the church sins against you go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. That's what our translation says, the NRSV, but I like a translation that says if a *brother* sins against you, go point out the fault when the two of you are alone. And so I have titled today's sermon If a brother sins against you. And then Jesus goes on to say if your brother listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you....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 or a tax collector.

What Jesus says in other words, is that if someone sins against you, the first thing you do is you go and talk to them alone. Jesus doesn't say you go and tell Mary Sue about it. You don't go and tell Ginger and Travis about it, and he doesn't say you wait until you've forgotten all about it, but you're still angry and hurt and you can no longer remember what you're angry and hurt about. And so you look at the person who has wronged you with unresolved anger. You go as

soon as you can and you talk to that person alone. That's not a lot of fun. It's not always easy, but I don't see anything in here about it being fun or easy. Because what's going to happen if you go and spread what they've done all over town. You're not going to resolve anything. Now they're going to be angry with you and rightly so. And what happens if you wait and forget all about it and you end up snapping at the person for reasons you don't understand. Well, now you're going to ruin the relationship. And that's not what you want. So you go as soon as you can and talk to the person alone. But then, of course, they may not listen to you. So you might come up to me one day and say Rich, I put some money in the offering plate and I'm pretty sure I saw you stick it in your pocket on the way out of church. I think what you did was a sin Pastor Rich, so would you kindly return that money to me or simply put it back in the offering plate to be counted. So suppose you say this to me and I say "Of course, my friend. I'm so sorry I did that, and I won't do it again." Well, in that case the issue is resolved. But suppose I don't do that. Suppose I say "No way, sucker! That money's mine now, Hahahahaha!" So you came to me alone and that didn't do you any good. Now, Jesus says you get out the church directory and go down the list and you call everybody and tell them what happened, right? No, not even then do you do that. It still isn't everyone's business. The next step, Jesus says is that you bring one or two others with you, and you have them sit down with me. But why? If I try talking to you alone Pastor Rich and that doesn't get me anywhere, why not go and tell the entire church. Well, here's why. Because before we get to that point, we have to get one or two other people who aren't emotionally involved in the matter who can listen to the dispute and judge it fairly. Because maybe you and I have two sides to the story. Maybe your side of the story is that you put that money in the offering plate that was meant for the church and maybe my side of the

story is that oh no, I had loaned you some money a month ago and you told me you were going to pay me back by putting the money in the offering plate. So just because you don't get anywhere with me when you come talk to me alone doesn't mean it's time yet to air out my dirty laundry, because maybe the problem is that other people need to listen to both sides of the story first. You see I have told you this morning that one of the things we believe in the Reformed tradition is that all of us are sinners. But being sinners doesn't just mean we do things wrong. It doesn't just mean that we commit sins. It means that we are also under a condition called Sin with a capital S. The sins we commit are like the symptoms and Sin is like the disease. So, one of the things during this pandemic that I'm sure you've tried to figure out if you've ever been sick is if you likely have covid or you have a cold. And so if you've gotten sick you have taken a look at the covid-19 symptoms and asked yourself, do I have a fever, do I have headaches, do I have a persistent cough, am I fatigued, and if you could answer yes to all these questions, hopefully you went and got tested. But all these things like fatigue a cough a fever, these are symptoms of an underlying disease or condition, just like the sins we commit are the symptoms of a disease called Sin. But being under the condition of Sin doesn't just mean that we commit sins, it also means that we have other symptoms as well. Like, for instance, we don't see things in the right way. And so if you come to me with a complaint or I come to you with a complaint, I may not see things the right way. I may misunderstand what's happened between us or you may misunderstand and that's why so often there are two sides of a story. And that's why before you tell the whole church what the offender has done, if you don't get anywhere with them, then you get one or two others who can be impartial, you get one or two others who can listen to the two sides of the story fairly and even-handedly and if they are in

agreement, there's a chance the offender will listen to them, but if they still won't listen to them, then and only then do you go to the church. But why do you go to the whole church? Jesus says you go to the whole church to gossip about the offender as much as possible, so that people can stop inviting them to their parties and picnics and stop speaking to them, and making eye contact with them? Right. No, you go to the church only for the purpose that the wrongdoer might meet with the church and listen to them as a last resort. They may listen this time, but if they fail to listen even this time, even after this third meeting, Jesus says you now treat them as a Gentile or a tax collector. And how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? Did he throw stones at them whenever he saw them walking by. No, actually he treated them pretty well. But I think what Jesus means is that you set up boundaries with them. They're always allowed to come to the church as a guest. But you no longer allow them to be voting members of the church or have any kind of position of authority because they've shown you that they don't value the church. You can pray for them, indeed you should pray for them, but you don't ask them to pray for you because if they don't care about the church or the people in it, they probably don't care about praying for you either. And you certainly don't entrust them with your secrets or your feelings, or things that you wouldn't tell absolutely anybody, because they are now acting like absolutely anybody. Now what if one day, they should change, what if one day they should come to their senses, or as we like to say in the church sometimes, what if one day they repent, do you welcome them back into church membership and potentially church leadership, of course you do. Of course you do. But until the day they decide to do that you always keep those boundaries.

Isn't this a beautiful process? I don't normally preach on processes and step by step instructions. In some ways to me that's sort of like preaching from a book of recipes, first you add a cup of flour then a cup of milk, but I wonder what would happen if we followed this process that Jesus lays out? What would happen in the church and in our lives? I think there would be a whole lot more unity in the church. I think there would be a whole lot more love in the church and frankly there'd be a lot more members in the church, because this is a way of firmly and without wavering saying no to wrongdoing but an absolute and unconditional yes to the wrongdoer. It's a way of saying no to sin but yes to the sinner. And what I think is that in so many churches that either don't follow this process or don't follow any semblance of this process you find everything but that. You have some churches saying no to sin and no to the sinner, some which say yes to sin and no to the sinner, and yet others which say yes to the sin and yes to the sinner. And none of that will work. None of that will work. The only way to live in such a way that we show each other love and respect and dignity is by saying no to sin and yes to the sinner. Jesus has given us the instructions. All we have to do is follow them.