

**Matthew 18: 21-35**  
**September 17, 2017**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**

Two weeks ago we heard Peter rebuke Jesus for announcing that he was going to die. This earned from Jesus an even sharper rebuke. "Get behind me Satan!"

Last week Jesus gives a teaching about the danger of conflict in the church and a way of bringing resolution and promoting peace in the community.

Today, Jesus follows a response to Peter's question about the limits of forgiveness with a parable about those who welcome forgiveness for themselves and who withhold it from others.

What, if anything, do these passages have in common?

We are people who as a rule hate change. We like calm waters. We like security and, within limits, predictability. We might call this "managed spontaneity." Just enough surprise without disturbing the basic orderliness of life. We don't like change which threatens the basic structure. We don't like being in uncharted territory.

There is nothing like death to destroy the familiar and predictable world. After all, the routine of life creates a familiar context for each day. We count on the people in our world *remaining* in our world. The deaths of people thousands of miles away may elicit sympathy and a desire to help; yet the more personally death touches us the more upsetting it becomes. There is no judgment in this. It is what makes us human. We are designed to care for those who are closest to us. We are designed to be vulnerable to those to whom we are tied by the

deepest bonds of affection and tenderness. It is no wonder then, when death in any form comes it is devastating and disrupting. The grief we feel is not only the loss of the person; it is the tearing apart of the fabric of our lives. Grief is not only a profound experience of loss; it is a question. How will I live in a world which makes no sense anymore—a world where I have lost my place?

Who can blame Peter for his reaction to the Jesus' announcement of his death? Jesus' death will cause a disruption in Peter's life that is utterly overwhelming.

I propose that in our culture we identify "God" with the security and familiarity of life and relationships. This accounts in many cases for the apparent loss of faith when death occurs. Again, there is no judgment here. Instead, I believe this crisis of faith is a watershed time. Do we seek the security of a "God-less" universe? Or, do we allow the trauma of loss become a doorway to a deeper and more reliable security?

Most of us here this morning might say that we recognize a deeper order and security in life—one that is not dependent on people and things that die. Indeed it is my job to teach about this deeper reality. Yet while I profess a trust in God's deep and abiding order of things, I *hate* conflict. I want everybody to be happy, of one mind and working together in companionable fellowship. When someone says or does something which threatens my warm and cozy idea of community, I am appalled!

This is the situation that Jesus addresses in last week's teaching. There is conflict in a community. Someone has said or done something hurtful, either intentionally or because some glib statement escapes their lips before the mouth had a chance to close. That's me most of the time. It is not what Jesus is talking about. When I say something glib, stupid and thoughtless

and it hurts your feelings, the right thing to do is tell me and I will be deeply sorry. I won't be surprised.

What Jesus is talking about is the threat to the community when these things happen within the life of the church and we *don't say anything*. We allow a small hurt to blossom into a resentment and anger and judgment. Before we know it we are talking about the person behind his or her back. We subtly or not so subtly bolster our woundedness by professing our innocence and our right to feel injured. We gather others around us to agree with us and before we know it things are said which return the perceived hurt or which create a chilly atmosphere which tells the offender that she or he is no longer welcome here. We think, "If only this person wasn't part of the church I would feel more comfortable."

Why is it so hard to go to a person who we feel has hurt us? I can think of many reasons. I don't want to be hurt again. More insidiously, I like holding on to my hurt and anger. It gives a feeling of being righteous. After all, I may be a miserable sinner; but if I can feel righteous compared to you I can feel better about myself.

No wonder that in Jesus' response to Peter today and in the parable following it is the one who is offended who is most at spiritual risk within the community of faith. It is the one who is wounded and does nothing about it who is most at risk of losing communion with the community and most tragically, fellowship with God.

This is why Jesus says to Peter, the task of forgiveness is never over. There will always be work to do. There is no magic number. Jesus says this because he knows our need for emotional and psychological stability. We want a quick fix. We want to preserve the image of

the church community as a place “where never is heard a discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all day.”

Such a place does not exist. And belief in a perfectly safe loving and nurturing community is a dangerous illusion. Jesus did not call to the good people. Good people don't need God's help. They get life in a way others don't. Jesus called *sinners*. He called people who go off the rails, who mean well but often do badly. He called people who are happy to receive forgiveness for their little faults but who are outraged when someone offends against *them*.

And so it is that the church has a choice. Are we to be a group of people who pretend that nothing is wrong and subtly—or not so subtly—push away those who threaten to disturb the peace? Or are we a community of broken people who come to Jesus to be healed and who are not surprised when we screw up and who there for are not surprised when somebody else does the same?

To the extent that we are healthy spiritually, we recognize that we are often more like the first type; yet we recognize and yearn to become more and more like the second. There is something freeing about being a chronic forgiven and forgiving sinner among other forgiven and forgiving sinners. Besides, it's more fun. Amen.

