

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
September 10, 2017
Matthew 18:15-20

Jim and I live on the grounds of Shawnigan Lake School, at the back part of 300 acres. Our home faces the west and not a power pole or streetlight interferes with our view. Quite simply, we feel we live in paradise. Not everyone thinks so, especially when they hear our stories about rats, mice, bears, cougars, and last week, get this a mink under the stove!

But it is amazing to sit in our lazyboys on the back porch looking out onto the hills in the west. Yesterday, I was delighted to see all the birds come to life. It was raining and the back lawn was hopping with birds. I saw more birds in an hour than I've seen all summer. It was wonderful. And as I sat there enjoying the activity and meditating on how my sermon might unfold, I noticed one bird returning to the bird feeder over and over. Nothing unusual with that, you might think. Except the feeder was empty. It has been all summer. I don't feed the birds in the summer. And as I watched this dark-eyed junco fly back and forth to the empty, somewhat dirty feeder, I was reminded of a news story I read in our local paper a couple of years ago. Residents were being warned to properly clean their bird feeders because some kind of bacteria or virus was affecting the local bird population and it came from dirty bird feeders. I can still remember my reaction. Could I be hurting or killing birds when my intention was just the opposite? When I wanted to help them out?

In today's reading from Matthew, we hear Jesus instructing his disciples what to do in the case of a conflict within his community followers. He's pretty

direct. He tells them to confront the problem directly. Not to gossip about someone, not to gain support from others and build a case against them. But to go and speak to them directly and personally. In reading up on the translation of several of the words and phrases I was helped in my understanding of this passage. For starters, scholars seem to agree that the phrase “against you” is optional in the opening sentence. It reads “If another member of the church sins against you....” So if we take out “against you,” the meaning would change to “if someone sins,” period. The situation Jesus is referring to needn’t be personal. But if you see someone doing something that is hurtful to themselves and/or others, as a member of the church, it’s incumbent on you to speak to that person. OK, that makes sense. This builds on the idea explored in last week’s sermon, Paul’s idea of the body of Christ being made up of all its members, of all people in the community. If each person matters, then the health of the body is contingent on the health of the individual parts. So it is everyone’s concern that each part is supported and cared for.

But I had a problem with the word, “member,” because that suggests belonging to an organization. Again, translation is the issue. The word “member” used here would be better translated as “brother” or “sister,” which makes it more urgent that we care for each other, because we are family. Not because we belong to an organization with rules about what, and what not, to do, but because we are family. OK, that works for me too!

So, Jesus is saying, family is important, and if a member is doing something that doesn’t serve the well being of the whole family, someone needs to speak to them. And he tells us how to do it. Go on your own and

speak to them. The words are “point out” but in the Greek, the word is intended to mean: “speak in a spirit of gentleness,” with the goal of restoring that person to spiritual health in the holy community. This is different than judging or condemning the person – pointing out that they are wrong or bad. Rather, it means telling the person that we care and are concerned. And wondering out loud if they are aware of the effect of their behaviour.

What is also helpful to know, when reflecting on this passage, is that it is preceded by the parable of the lost sheep where we learn that *every person* is precious to God. And it is followed by the passage on forgiveness, where Peter asks, “How many times do we need to forgive?” and Jesus replies that there is no end to the need for forgiveness.

OK, so what does this have to do with the birds in the feeder? Where am I going with all this?

It occurred to me that we need to engage in receiving and giving forgiveness to others as a regular practice because we all are engaged in life, which is messy, and which involves constant stepping on each others’ toes. Sometimes consciously, but as with the birds and the unsanitary bird feeder, without any inkling. I’ll give you a small, recent example. When I leave here today, I’m going home to company. So I wanted the house clean. Jim told me he’d take care of it. But yesterday morning, before I headed up here, I thought, “I’ll just give the floor a sweep and a quick mop.” I was just finishing up when Jim wandered in. “What are you doing?” he said. “I was going to take care of that!” and I could see the confusion on his face. And in that instance, I realized that I had hurt him. With the best intentions. I hadn’t taken him at his word. I hadn’t accepted his offer to take care of preparing the house. And then, I

realized something deeper. I was still miffed at him for not cleaning up as promised before guests earlier this month. I hadn't told him and here I was 'sticking it to him' in an passive aggressive way. I could have pretended to be hurt and justified in that "I was just trying to help out," but in reality, I was being dishonest. And I apologized. In a marriage, there is so much opportunity to learn the nuances of honesty and forgiveness! It can be hard, but it's good! And in the church, it's the same. We rub up against each other. It can be uncomfortable. But as someone once said, "You don't get rid of your hard edges unless you bump up against others regularly." When I spend a day on my own, it's easy to feel good about myself. It's when I go out and open my mouth, that the real learning begins!

We need to be a forgiving people. Because each one of us is stumbling around. Yet, each one of us has already been forgiven. Christ died on the cross and showed just how far God's mercy extends. There is nothing we are not forgiven. There is nothing we can do to be rejected by God. We just need to fully realize this and pay it forward!

And so every Sunday we confess our sins. Not because we want to view ourselves as bad or wrong or sinful. But because we need to be reminded that we sin without knowing, we hurt others without knowing, we hurt others even with our good intentions. And so we need to be reminded of our frailty and dependence on the love of God. And we're also reminded that it isn't helpful to dwell on our own hurt as if we were special. Everyone gets hurt. Everyone suffers the bumbblings of others. In this we are definitely not alone!

The other important point here is that praying is just the beginning. We also have to act, Jesus says. We are to tell each other when we feel wronged,

or when we see wrong being done. Not in judgment, but as a way of supporting our growing awareness of how we might be hurting others without knowing it. When one person comes to me and tells me how what I've done has hurt them, I get a chance to either clear up a misunderstanding, or to make an apology. When someone goes behind my back and says things that are either true or untrue, I don't have the chance to clear the air and make things right. I have been cast in a bad light and don't get the chance to learn and grow.

And most of us are doing the best we know how. Right? We all fall down and make mistakes and it would be nice to be acknowledged as both making mistakes and doing our best.

When we approach others in this way, with their well being as our highest priority, we might be able to point out gently what has been said or done that was hurtful. And I can't tell you how often this kind of discussion reveals a total misunderstanding that can be easily cleared up. One example of a complete misunderstanding jumps to mind. Years ago, when I was on team for a Cursillo weekend (if you don't know what a Cursillo is – ask me at coffee). Anyways, we were working as groups discussing a talk we'd heard. One member of the group was tasked with writing down the salient points. The woman doing this starting doodling with the felt pen creating a decorative border on the flip chart. I cringed. I can't stand the sound of feltpen on newsprint (it's like nails on a blackboard to me), so I said, somewhat sharply, "Oh please, don't do that!" The rest of the weekend this woman seemed noticeably quiet. At the closing, she blurted out how hurt she was when I told her not to speak anymore. I was so glad she spoke up because I got the chance

to apologize and tell her I was talking about the doodling, not her participation in the discussion!!

But the gospel reading we heard today was addressing much more than an unpleasant sound. When Matthew was writing his gospel account, the followers of Jesus were facing persecution. It was of paramount importance that they stay healthy as a community in order to survive. Matthew is challenging them to do their work, to build themselves up through prayer and good works – as a community! Personal salvation wasn't going to cut it. They had to stay together and if they were going to stay together, they had to work out their differences and hold each other to account.

But if a person isn't willing to engage, isn't willing to listen, Jesus spells it out. They are an outsider. I'm not sure if this is a judgment or more of a description of what happens when someone refuses to listen.

So it seems we just need to be willing to engage with others; to be open. That as a community struggling with all our rough edges, living in close proximity, if we are open to struggle through, Jesus assures us, "for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Most of the time we can laugh and shake it off and say, "there I go or there you go stepping on toes and falling," and we can laugh together. But sometimes there needs to be an open and frank conversation. A conversation that has been started with prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to give us the words for clarity, charity and healing. A conversation that acknowledges that none of us is perfect, we weren't created to be. We were created to be in relationship! That means being willing to learn how to speak from our clumsiness and lack of

awareness, from our moments of jealousy and spite, from our brokenness and fear, and say either, "I'm sorry," or, "I forgive you."

Why? Because we are following the Master of forgiveness who forgave us once and for all, so that we can forward and spread that Spirit of Forgiveness, helping ease the pain of a world in which we are all, hopefully, learning how to get along.

Amen.