

September 10, 2017

TEXT: Matthew 18:15–22

TITLE: Relentless Reconciliation

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Today's a big day for our church. We are back to our full schedule of two Sunday morning worship services, Christian Education for all ages, brass and percussion, choir with organ—Rally Day 2017. Even though the renovation work is very much in process, everyone is falling back into their familiar Sunday morning routines. Everyone, that is, except those who are not here.

Talking to people in the pews about those who are not beside you in the pews can be an awkward conversation. It can feel like I'm diminishing the value of the individuals, families, and visitors who are with us today. But having led about 50 new members classes here at ELPC over the years, one thing stands out from the conversations shared at those sessions: while some people come to ELPC as active Presbyterians from one part of Pittsburgh who've moved closer to this part of Pittsburgh, most people—70–80 percent—come with a story of disappointment that either led them to leave their prior church or stay away from all churches for years. Slowly, by a variety of paths and God's grace, they found their way back inside sanctuary walls. But it has seldom been an easy path. It involved learning to trust the very institution that is supposedly built on love and trust. So it is right to spend some time talking with you who are here about those who are not here.

We all know that churches are imperfect institutions. When Garrison Keillor did his Prairie Home Companion radio show, once a year he'd do an entire show built around jokes. And invariably there would be a whole section of church jokes: how the new liberal church down the street has six commandments and four suggestions; how Presbyterians are bad singers because they're always reading ahead in the hymnal to see if they agree with the lyrics; and that the difference between Baptists and Presbyterians is that Baptists won't wave to each other in the liquor store.

Why do people not come to church? There are scores of reasons, but it usually comes down to one of two things: they stopped coming because Sunday worship seemed irrelevant or because Sunday worship brought them into contact with church leaders or members who disappointed them, abused, angered, or offended them in some way or another. Both of those categories come down to a single dynamic: broken relationships. If there is no one you truly connect with on Sunday morning, whether in the pulpit or in the pews, or if a few of those around you upset or hurt you, then of course the natural response is to walk out the church door and never look back.

I'd wager that almost every single person here has had seasons in their lives in which they did not attend church regularly. People break off relationships,

including church people. Christians are not immune to conflict. The difference is how we decide to address and resolve conflict—by sweeping it under the rug or relentlessly seeking reconciliation.

The reading we heard from Matthew 18 at first sounds harsh and legalistic. The threefold process on dealing with conflict, ending with treating an unrepentant offender like a tax collector or outcast, does not appear to be helpful advice for churches today. Which is why you never read a scripture passage in isolation from what comes before it and after it. The verses right before this passage tell about how a shepherd with a hundred sheep will leave the 99 to go find the one lost sheep; and it ends with this promise: *It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.* And although the lectionary wanted me to stop at verse 20 today, I extended the passage two more verses so we'd hear how Peter is reminded by Jesus to forgive others, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Seeking lost sheep—forgiving 77 times. In-between these exhortations is guidance on resolving conflict in church. First, the one offended against is to seek out the offender. The victims are to reclaim a degree of their dignity by initiating reconciliation that begins with an honest airing of grievances done person-to-person. If this doesn't lead to a measure of healing, one or two others are invited to a second conversation—not to outnumber and overwhelm the person accused, but to have others present to listen, to make sure both sides are hearing one another, and that real justice is sought by all. If that fails, the larger church becomes involved. Sadness and brokenness are not swept under the rug, but named, and when appropriate, repented of. If in the end the other person remains outside the fellowship, then no one wins. Both sides are scarred by the loss. And if some choose to remain on the outside, like Gentiles or tax collectors were in the old days, then they become the focus of evangelism, of ongoing efforts to restore the lost sheep. The bottom line is that the church is not a simply voluntary association of like-minded souls. It is a fellowship of different-minded souls who find their unity in Jesus Christ and are committed to doing whatever messy, frustrating, joyous work it takes to preserve that unity.

Here at ELPC, our mission statement defines this as showing radical hospitality. In cases where there is brokenness, you could also say that our responsibility is to pursue relentless reconciliation. To leave the 99 and seek out the one lost sheep, humbly realizing that sometimes we are part of the reason the sheep became lost in the first place.

And yes, by grace reconciliation does happen. A quick Internet search will give you scores of inspirational examples of new life and reconciliation: South Africans finding peace through their Truth and Reconciliation commission, as well as Hutu and Tutsis in Rwanda moving beyond their land's legacy of violence. American mothers pleading for clemency in court for the shooters responsible for their children's death and staying in relationship with the murderers while in

prison. A husband asking for a reduced sentence for the young man whose impaired driving led to the death of the husband's wife. People finding healing after cases of clergy abuse in local church congregations, so that they can again worship and pray to the God who never stopped grieving for them in their absence. People finding a real welcome within a church community whatever their age, race, education, sexual identity, or personal history—by God's grace working through imperfect vessels of grace like each of us.

Pastor Dave Carver over in Crafton is a good guy and he likes to tell the story of how in 1959 the nation of Malawi was moving from being a British colony to independence. British authorities were worried about the safety of missionaries living there, so they sent Royal Air Force planes to drop messages so the whites could plan their evacuation the next day. But on the next day when the plane approached, an unmistakable message was written in stones on the ground: Ephesians 2:14, which says *[Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us.*

There are many inspiring stories about reconciliation. But most important is the reality facing us today. We all know someone who is not in church for some reason—big, painful, messy reasons as well as little, superficial reasons. What would it take to initiate reconciliation with one person in your life? What might you do to relentlessly pursue reconciliation that will help someone lead a renewed life of Christian fellowship and worship?

Next Sunday is our Visitors' Sunday. We'll have Journey worship at 8:45 and this service at 11:00 with Sunday School classes in-between and the Church Life Sampler after worship, telling all about the programs and ministries here at ELPC. Think of someone with whom you can initiate reconciliation—to whom you can call or send a note and invite back to church. It may take more than one invitation. It may even take sitting down with a few other people and talking about old wounds and unresolved disappointment. But honestly, that's what it means to be church. That's what we're called to do faithfully, relentlessly.

There's another important reason why we do this—and I'll close with this point. We've often heard Matthew 18 verse 20—*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.* We take great comfort in knowing that Christ is with us. When he was born, he was heralded as Immanuel, God-with-us. And at the end of Matthew's gospel Jesus promises to be with us, even to the end of the age. Christ is with us when we gather together for worship—two or three coming together for prayer and bible study. But in light of where this verse appears in the gospel, it is clear that Christ is truly present when we work for reconciliation. This whole section in Matthew's gospel is about finding lost sheep, going out to one who has broken relationship with you and seek to make things right. That is what it means to do God's work here on earth. It is precisely in our efforts to heal what is broken, to talk together and listen and forgive one another seven or seventy-seven times, that Christ is present.

When we celebrate baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we believe Christ is spiritually present. When we celebrate communion, breaking the bread of life and pouring out the cup of salvation, we believe Christ is spiritually present. This day we've heard that when we sit down together, relentlessly pursuing reconciliation, Christ is in our midst. Thank you for being here today. Reach out so someone will join you next Sunday. And as you go about this good work, remember Christ is with you. Literally.

AMEN