

## HEALING A COMMUNITY

**Matthew 18. 15 – 20**

**10 September 2023**

15 "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

All communities, all families, have their fallings-out. From our Gospel passage today, Jesus is clear that the village communities he was striving to create through his preaching and miracle working as he toured his small country would be no exception. And Matthew, whose Gospel alone records his Master's words, ministering in his own community would have known his own not immune from conflict. If we needed any further confirmation that early Christian communities were hardly trouble-free, we would need to look no further than the Pauline Epistles!

Those communities were tight ones; they needed to be, since the outside world, whether mainstream Jewish or Graeco-Roman were suspicious of, if not actively hostile to, the new faith. And tight communities can be uncomfortable places. The phenomenon is not confined to the ancient world. One day, when my Vicar and I were chatting about the English Civil War (as you do!) he told me this story. In the latter half of the last century, an Archdeacon was trying hard to get two West-country Parishes to amalgamate. Neither was opposed to amalgamation per se, but each Parish was adamant that it would never do so with the other. The puzzled Archdeacon was eventually enlightened. In the Civil War, one Parish had been for the King, the other had been for Parliament. Amalgamation was never going to happen!

Jesus' words are both spoken and reported in the context of first century, Jewish life, but dig a bit, and the principles he is enjoining on Christian communities and the individuals that make them up, are truly timeless.

Look at how it starts. One member of the community has wronged another. A very human impulse in the one wronged would be to tell others who might be sympathetic. A 'community within a community' is created against the wrong-doer, who is put on the defensive, and, again being very human, is likely to react angrily or at least stubbornly, insisting on 'their side of the story'. No, says Jesus. Speak privately; speak quietly. If that doesn't work, doesn't resolve the wrong, then escalate, but do it in the most private way possible, with a friend or two of yours. If that doesn't work, then you have to go to the whole community. The whole method is designed to preserve human dignity and minimise open conflict.

It also, you'll note, is open to dialogue at every stage. The alleged wrong doer has a chance to speak. The words 'Why did you think I meant that? I didn't; this is what I meant'; 'I'm sorry, but you made me so angry with what you said the week before'; those words can be spoken, can be heard, and can be judged for their integrity – or lack of it.

So, Jesus is talking about a method of conflict resolution. But he never stops at method. He always goes to the heart of human intention. And the message is radical. The clue is in the words 'If he listens to you, you have gained your brother'. Yes, of course, if I have been

wronged, I want that wrong righted – the words retracted, the deed undone. But Jesus' message is that there is something just as important in all this. The wrong done has, in however small a way, damaged the community, and crucially, has damaged the person who has committed it, whether, and in fact especially, if they are unaware of that fact. Wrongdoing creates scar tissue on the soul. It builds up, often imperceptibly, but it builds. Jesus' injunction places the wronged person in the role of community healer.

What is radical about that is it reverses the psychological power-relationship between the two. However nervous inside the wronged person may be in engaging in this 'healer role' (always only to be taken on if it is safe to do so) he or she is no longer 'victim' but rather 'practitioner'. There is a world of difference between the two.

Why this method; why this intention? We do not have to go far to discover it in Jesus' words. We are to do this because the Father does it; he does it with us, all the time. Look at the parable of the prodigal son; so core to Jesus' teaching about the relationship between us and the Father. The son has done a truly dreadful thing. In demanding his share of the property that would accrue to him on his father's death, he is, according to the custom of the time, as good as wishing him so. But the father's response to his son's return is embarrassingly counter-cultural. He rushes to the returning son; embraces him; calls for a feast, for joy. His response is not 'Go from me; you have done the unforgivable thing' but 'You have come back!' As he watched and waited for a sign of his son upon the road, the words in his heart were 'I love you; will you not come back to me? Will you not be healed?'

And as the Father does it to us, time and again, all through our lives on this earth, so are we to do it to and for each other; are to be watchers and healers of each other wherever we can; wherever we have the real power to do so; whenever -and only- if it is safe to do so. In our looser society, the method and intention Jesus enjoins is for families, for friends, for colleagues, and for congregations.

Hard? Of course. Unaided, impossibly so. It goes against so many of our human inclinations and default modes. To do it, we have to open ourselves to the resource guaranteed to us by our baptism, the Holy Spirit. And when we fail, and we will, we must ask pardon of Him, and try again; try next time.

As Christians, we are in the business of 'gaining our brother' – whatever gender he or she may be.

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