

“Grace, it’s the glue of the church”
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Let’s be real. This isn’t our favorite Bible passage. It sounds like those Christians who are *a little too enthusiastic* in pointing out other people’s sins. It reminds us of churches that publicly shame and exclude people who mess up or who just don’t fit. There’s nothing wrong with the idea that we can regulate and encourage a moral life; it’s just that historically it’s almost always ended in a hurtful, legalistic power struggle.

Take John Calvin, for example—a French pastor and leader of the Reformation, whose ideas helped form Presbyterianism. In Geneva, Calvin set out to create a different kind of society, one that reflected the kingdom of God. He founded tuition-free public schools. He created a church that cared for the sick and the needy. And he established a council to exercise church discipline.

At first, the Genevan Consistory was intended to help new Protestants better understand and live out their faith. It was meant to broker reconciliation and healing. But in the end, it became its own Inquisition, summoning Genevans and rebuking, sometimes imprisoning, them, when they refused to repent of their sins. Once confronted publicly, if they still refused to repent, they could be denied Communion or even excommunicated.

The Consistory got a little carried away. It started closing shops and taverns. It held a trial for every argument that couldn’t be resolved. It imprisoned people for “wild” dancing or “outrageous” singing. It punished people for skipping sermons or not paying attention to the preacher (yeah... you’d all be in trouble). If a pastor felt that parents had chosen for their child a name that was too Catholic, a saint’s name for instance (like Patrick...), the pastor was authorized to change that child’s name during the baptism. Surprise!

It’s easy to see how this passage in Matthew could be interpreted as a great way to adjudicate the rights of the offended. It’s a guarantee that sinners will have to pay for what they’ve done. And if they refuse to repent, they’ll be kicked out of the community.

Community—it’s one of those things we all say we want but when we actually get it, it kind of sucks. As pastor David Lose writes, the problem with community is that “it’s made up of people! And people—not you and me, of course, but most people—can be difficult, challenging, selfish, and unreliable.”

So the idea that we could pick and choose who belongs to our community and who doesn’t is pretty appealing. Perhaps someone in this church has said or done something that hurt or disrespected or sinned against you. Maybe it was intentional; maybe not. But either way, you got hurt. And there’s a part of us that would enjoy getting justice.

What usually happens of course is that we either bury the problem (which means we actually bury the people involved) or walk away. We leave the church in anger, join another church until

someone there makes us mad, and then walk away again. We become scarred, battered from years of unresolved conflict and hurt.

These scars reveal a fundamental problem with the church as it is today.

As pastor Karl Jacobson says, “We simply don’t know how to live together, fight together, and stay together.” We don’t know how to be a community.

That’s the problem Jesus is addressing here, and we have misinterpreted Jesus’ words.

In this passage, which has come to be called the “Rule of Christ,” the goal isn’t to punish, humiliate, or even achieve justice; it’s to rescue. It’s to redeem the offender and the offended; it’s to heal a broken community.

The goal is, as Jesus says in v. 15, to “regain a brother or sister.” The NRSV translation unfortunately loses the power of that language; it says “a member of the church.” But the Greek says, “brother.” Jesus deliberately uses the language of family, because family is the one thing in this life that most of us don’t casually abandon.

Jesus is speaking of community in the same terms that Paul describes the church—as a body in which the suffering of one member is cause for all to grieve. In this body, writes Paul, no member can say to another, “I have no need of you” (1 Cor. 12:12-26).

When there’s conflict or hurt or sin, we talk to each other. It is by this rule that the community is held together, such that neither the offender nor the offended is cast off.

Now you might object, “Hold on! Doesn’t Jesus go on to say that if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, he or she should be treated as a Gentile and tax collector? I know enough about 1st century Judaism to know that those are code words for repugnant outsiders. Doesn’t that imply judgment and expulsion?”

Good question, hypothetical person! That is indeed how many Christians have read that sentence. And in the mouth of anyone else, this would be a call to exile and shun. But this is not anyone else. This is Jesus, the one decried by the Pharisees as a “friend of tax collectors and sinners,” the one who is constantly reaching out to outsiders, the one who preaches the forgiveness of sins.

When Jesus says this, he has just finished telling the parable of the lost sheep and describing the lengths to which the shepherd will go to regain the lost. Jesus has just said, “It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.”

Peter goes on to ask how long he should persist with forgiveness. Jesus responds by saying that he should forgive 70 times 7, which is further biblical code, meaning “without end.”

When Jesus tells the disciples to regard this unrepentant person as an outsider, he is telling them two things: (1) if this person refuses to change and stop sinning against you, they don’t get to

stay a brother or sister to you. They don't get to keep hurting you. God protects the victim. (2) But they still matter. Outsiders aren't to be ignored or hated; they're to be pursued and loved. If they've gone this far in refusing to repent, then clearly they don't understand what the gospel is about. And it's your job to show them, through your love. We never give up on them.

It's not surprising that church people sin, or hurt each other, or get on each other's nerves, or disagree. The church is made up of people. Messy, broken people. Conflict is everywhere, and we shouldn't expect the church to be any different. What should be different, however, is how we respond to that conflict. The response isn't a Consistory. It isn't a legalistic code that ends in shunning.

We don't walk away. We don't blow up. We don't hit back. We don't hide the problem, either. We don't ask the offended to shut up and suffer. We tell the truth. We talk. We seek reconciliation. We love. Anything else is not Christian. Anything else is not fitting of the grace and forgiveness *we* have received. Anything else, of course, is easy. This is hard. This is church.

Christ hopes that we will find agreement, but even if we don't, Christ promises that as long as we show up, as long as we stick together, as long as we "gather in his name," he will be with us. Even as we hurt and annoy each other, even as we sin, Christ is here, because we are here. Even amid conflict, Christ is at work in us, transforming us, creating right here an experience of heaven.

I've seen glimpses of that community here at Westminster. I see it right now, as I look out on this diverse gathering. I see it in the way this church embraces people with different abilities and disabilities. I see it as I look out on some people who have hurt each other, and yet are here today, together. I see it whenever you take care of each other, whenever you visit each other in the hospital or cook meals for each other or just hold each other and cry. I see it when you talk and disagree about complex ideas, and yet hug each other afterward. I see it in how you wrapped Jenna and me in love after Ezra and Leo died.

I saw it when a church in our presbytery was considering leaving the PC(USA) because it disagreed with our inclusive stance on marriage and ordination. They asked our stated clerk, Steve Plank, why they should stay. He didn't give a long theological or ecclesiological answer. He didn't give them a sermon. He said just three words: "We need you."

We need you.

What if instead of writing people off, or judging or punishing, we offered these words to those who have hurt us, or annoyed us, or disagreed with us? What if we just said, "We need you."

These are the words of grace, and grace is the glue of the church. It is what binds us together. It is what saves us all.

Amen.