

**Matthew 18:**

<sup>15</sup>*"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. <sup>16</sup>But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup>If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup>Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup>Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup>For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."*

I bet most of us come to church to feel good, to see their friends, to sing beloved hymns. How many of us come to church to be challenged, to learn hard truths, to confront ourselves, our brokenness, our need for healing and wholeness, our need for forgiveness, our need to live in community?

Scott Peck in the *Road Less Traveled* opens with this statement: Life is difficult. I would add to that: Relationships are messy. Life is messy. Church is messy. There's a saying "Can't we all just get along? Even the psalmist must have had similar thoughts when he wrote in Ps 133 *"How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!"* It is written, Wherever 2 or 3 gather in my name, there I am in their midst. It is also reality is that wherever 2 or 3 humans gather for anything, there is bound to be some conflict at some point, and the church is no exception. Even/especially in the church, we experience conflict. It might be an argument over hymn selections or whether the flag belongs near the altar. The problem could be hurt feelings over something the pastor did or did not do. It might be a poorly received council or SPR decision. Perhaps a major denominational decision divides the congregation into various camps.

You know how church conflict usually works. The 3rd Grade Sunday School teacher gets mad at the Superintendent and tells the her best friend about it, who happens to be the head of the Mosquito Abatement Committee. During a church meeting, this person, much to the surprise of the pastor, says at the end of the meeting, "I think we have a problem with the Sunday School Superintendent." Soon the whole church is talking about it, except the people who are actually upset with each other. This creates gossip in the church and soon the pastor is spending more time smoothing ruffled feathers and trying to get everyone to get along than in preparing sermons or reaching out to new people.

What separates the church—at least what should separate the church from the rest of the world is how we deal with conflict; how we work together. The key is all in how we handle it. Do we practice love or do we give in to gossip? As a church we need to continually learn to live with one another.

When there is failure of relationship between two people, the first step is for the one who has been wronged to point out the wrong privately, when the other will not be humiliated or put on the defensive. Sometimes we want to begin by spreading the story of how we have been harmed. We want to gossip. We've been hurt! We want to hurt back! So, we avoid our enemy. Our *temptation* is to get revenge.

Jesus offers a different way. Start with confronting the person directly, tell the truth. Confess that you feel hurt, work towards reconciliation. **If the person listens to us, then we are to work to restore this relationship.**

If private consultation is not enough to effect reconciliation, then two or three trusted parties should be asked to listen in on the next conversation, to provide some unbiased reflection on the issues and dynamics between the two.

What harm might any of us do by talking about someone else's shortcomings. Gossip is unhealthy. And at some point we need to take accountability for those actions. To look at how we hurt one another because we're not courageous enough to have difficult conversations. Gossip leads to conflict. Conflict saps the life out of the church. Many churches, perhaps the majority, suffer from persistent conflict because people don't know how to talk with each other when they are angry or disagree with each other.

May we provide a welcome harbor for all those who are hurting and broken, for all those whom God loves. We will find Christ present—right in the middle of the mess and the chaos. Thanks be to God!