

Fight Like a Christian

Matthew 18:15-20

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Brennan Manning used to tell this wonderful joke. It goes like this:

There was a knock on the door of Moishe's house. He opened the door, and there stood his very good friend Aaron.

Aaron said, "I've got to talk to the Rabbi."

"Why do you got to talk to the Rabbi?"

"Moishe, a terrible thing has happened... my son has become Christian."

"Ahhhh!" Moishe says, "Aaron, let me tell you a very funny thing. *My* son is a Christian."

The two of them rush down the street. They pass Levi. Levi says, "Moishe, Aaron, where you going?"

"To talk to the Rabbi."

"What's going on?"

"Our two sons become Christians."

Levi says, "Come over into the doorway." Levi peeks out and says, "Let me tell you a very funny thing... *My* son is a Christian."

The three of them rush down to the synagogue. They knock on the door. Out comes the Rabbi. He says, "Aaron, Moishe, Levi, why are you here? No worship. Go home. Don't bother me."

"Rabbi, we've got a confession about our families. Our three sons become Christians."

"Good God. Into my office," says the Rabbi and locks the door. The Rabbi goes behind the desk, buries his head in his hands. After a long pause, he looks up and says, "Let me tell you a very funny thing..... *my* son is a Christian."

"No!" says Aaron.

"We are lost," says Moishe.

“What are we going to do?” says Levi. “Rabbi, you are our answer man. What are we going to do?”

“You come with me,” says the Rabbi. They march through the synagogue up to the sanctuary. The Rabbi says, “Kneel. Shut up. I pray.”

He prays, “Yahweh, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, God of Israel, God of the prophets: what is going on? All of our juniors are going down the tube. Everyone of them is becoming a Christian. Yahweh, give us a word. Yahweh, speak a word to us.”

Long silence... And finally, God says, “Let me tell you a very funny thing...”

Imagine this: Jesus *Christ* expects us to act *Christian*.

I had a call with my spiritual director on Tuesday morning, and somehow we got on the subject of the gospel of Matthew, and how in this particular gospel, Jesus lays before us all of these impossible demands, all of these impossible ethics: turn the other cheek, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you. And my spiritual director said, “Sometimes, you just want to shake Matthew’s Jesus by the shoulders and say, ‘Will ya’ lighten up and enjoy life a little?’”

But in Matthew – maybe more than in any of the other gospels – Jesus is concerned with helping us know what it means to *act* Christian.

And in our passage for this morning, he is portrayed as setting clear guidelines for how we ought to deal with conflict within the boundaries of the church community.

What do you do when someone in the church says something, does something, allows something that causes you or others harm?

Jesus says that the loving, mature, Christian thing to do is to confront them about it.

If a brother or sister in the faith sins against you, go to that one in private and point out to them what they have done. If they listen to you, you have regained that relationship.

If, however, that person does not listen to you, then go again, but this time take two or three others with you, so that they can stand witness to what is said and done.

And if that doesn’t work, bring it before the whole church. And if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let that one become to you as a Gentile or a tax collector.

It’s often referred to as The Rule of Christ, and when it goes rightly, it never goes beyond the first step – the one where when I hurt you, you come to me in private, I listen, and hopefully we are restored to one another.

In the life of Christian discipleship, we have word for that. We call it *reconciliation*.

One church member harms another, sometimes without even knowing it. The harmed member seeks out the one who did the harming and asks to meet in private. There, the harmed member shares how he or she has been hurt. The one who caused the hurt *listens*, and — if all goes as it ought — at the end of the day, the relationship is regained, reconciliation is achieved, and *the body is made whole* once again.

Why does this matter so much in the Christian church?

Because conflict between members not only *affects* a few individuals, but it *infects* the entire community.

The Methodist Pastor, Jeremy Troxler, compares it to a splinter that needs to be removed before it becomes infected and makes the whole body sick. He says:

“It hurts to have somebody poke at a splinter. It hurts even when you are the one doing the poking. When my five-year-old daughter gets a splinter now, she won’t tell me. She has learned that splinters mean tweezers and scraping and crying and hurt. Better just to pretend there is no splinter: ‘What splinter, daddy?’

Do you know what? Sometimes *I* want to pretend she doesn’t have a splinter, too, because taking it out is going to hurt me as much as her. I want to look at her finger and say, ‘What splinter?’ And I can almost persuade myself that my looking the other way is called ‘love’” (“The tie that binds,” *Faith and Leadership*, Dec. 5, 2011).

But we know better, right? Love isn’t turning a blind eye when someone’s behavior is hurting others. Christian love is stopping to address it, even if addressing it hurts you as much as it might hurt them.

The Christian family is supposed to work differently than what we see in the world. When we fight, we’re supposed to fight a particular way — no cheap shots, no low blows, no whispering in quiet corridors, no passing ugly notes under the table, no talking *about* someone else but only talking *to* them. When someone hurts you, you’re supposed to go directly to the person and explain the harm they’ve caused. And *if all goes well*, you’ll regain that relationship and you’ll restore the church body to full health.

But it doesn’t always go well, does it?

Sometimes we just can’t agree on who is actually at fault. Sometimes we see only the hurt they have caused us while remaining blind to the hurt that we might have caused them. Sometimes *we* think *we* are right and *they* are wrong; and *they* think *they* are right, *we* are wrong — and ne’er shall the two meet.

What do we do then?

To me, *this* is the real challenge of this passage — because our text assumes from the very start that the one doing the confronting *is in the right*.

Maybe they are. But what if they aren't? What if they *think* they're right, but actually, they aren't?

Or what if there is no way of knowing who is right or who is wrong in a situation? What if it's all built on a disagreement about differing perspectives or personal preference or about something that is only opinion.

My favorite flavor of milkshake is cookies and cream. Christen's favorite flavor anything but cookies and cream. Who's right? Who's wrong?

Maybe the question ought to be, "*Who cares?!*"

But that's the thing: these instructions aren't about determining who's right and who's wrong. They're about being *restored*. *Reconciled*. *Returned* to one another.

Did you notice that according to this passage, it's the responsibility of the one who *feels wronged*, and not the one who did the wrong, to take the initiative? No sitting around stewing, waiting for them to realize they hurt you. You go to them. And you do it not to be vindicated, but to be reconciled. That's the mature Christian thing to do.

How different is that attitude and that posture than what we normally default to when someone offends us?

I don't know about you, but when someone ticks me off or hurts my feelings, I tend toward one of three different strategies:

The first one I often try is to pretend that nothing happened. "Oh, you said something rude or hurtful? I hadn't even noticed." But I did. And I will stew on it. And I'll add it to the evidence locker that I keep in my mind with your name on it, and I will use it as ammunition against you in some later argument.

The second strategy I tend toward is the "silent treatment," and am I *good* at this one. Here's the trick: you never tell the offending party what they've done. You just stop talking to them. You shun them. You walk past them like they're not even there. You don't take their calls. You don't answer their texts. And, whatever you do, you don't explain it to them. They ought to know why you're not talking to them.

The third is to launch an all out assault. The staff here at the church have come to call it my "grenade launcher" — I think for rather obvious reasons. This is rarely my first response, or my second one. It's usually what happens when I've already tried looking the other way or the "silent treatment." If neither of those worked, I pull out the big guns. *Ka-bloom!* And I feel instant regret. There just ain't much left of a relationship to recover if I've launched a grenade...

The truth is, I want to do better. I don't want to cut and run. I don't want to pretend that nothing is wrong. And I definitely don't want to blow up my relationships.

I want to do it right. But I'm going to need you to want to do it right, too. Because it's going to take both of us if we're going to fight like Christians.

Do you know how C.S. Lewis imagined hell?

In his book, *The Great Divorce*, he paints a picture of hell that is haunting to me — because it's so similar to the way that we so often choose to live. Hell is like a vast, gray city, Lewis says, a city inhabited only at its outermost edges, with rows and rows and rows of empty houses in the middle — empty because everyone who once lived in them has quarreled with the neighbors and moved further out, and quarreled with the neighbors and moved again, leaving empty streets full of empty houses behind.

That, says Lewis, is how hell got so large — empty at the center and inhabited only on the fringes — because everyone in it chose distance instead of confrontation as the solution to a fight.

And as haunting a picture as that might be, what's worse is realizing how much church fights have done to contribute to the spread of hell.

You see, it matters that we fight differently. It matters that the church does everything in its power to be source of reconciliation and restoration in this world — a body whose work is a “coming together” and not a “pulling away.”

In fact, the word we translate as “church” is the Greek word *ekklesia* and it literally means, the “assembled body,” the “gathered community,” the “congregation.” When *ekklesia* is at its best, we aren't pulling away from each other, we are pulling toward each other.

Fred Craddock used to tell this story:

“It was the custom in that church at Easter to have a baptismal service, and my church immerses and it was held as a baptismal service in Watts Barr Lake on Easter at sundown. Out on a sandbar, I — with the candidates for baptism — moved into the water and then they moved across to the shore where the little congregation was gathered singing around a fire and cooking supper.

They had constructed little booths for changing clothes with bales and hanging and — as the candidates moved from the water — they went in and changed clothes and went to the fire in the center. And finally — last of all — I went over, changed clothes, and went to the fire.

Once we were all around the fire, this is the ritual of that tradition. Glen Hickey — always Glen — introduced the new people: gave their names, where they lived, and

their work. Then the rest of us formed a circle around them, while they stayed warm at the fire.

And the ritual was each person in the circle gave her or his name and said this:

'My name is _____, and if you ever need somebody to do washing and ironing...'

'My name is _____, and if you ever need anybody to chop wood...'

'My name is _____, and if you ever need anybody to baby-sit...'

'My name is _____, and if you ever need anybody to repair your house...'

'My name is _____, and if you ever need anybody to sit with your sick...'

'My name is _____, and if you ever need a car to go to town...'

And around the circle, and then we ate, and then we had a square dance. And, at some point, Percy Miller – with his thumbs in his overalls – would stand and say, 'It's time to go.' And everybody left. But Percy lingered behind and – with his big shoe – kicked sand over the dying fire.

And the first time I experienced it, he looked at me and said, 'Craddock, folks don't ever get any closer than this.'

In that little community, they have a name for that. I've heard it in other communities, too. In that community, their name for that is 'church.' They call it 'church'" (*Craddock Stories*, 152).

You see, when we act like Christians ought, even our fights have the ability to bring us closer together. And when that happens, we get the high privilege of calling it 'church.'

Amen.