

“Conflict Resolution”

The Rev. Drew Willard
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Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-29

Matthew 21:23-32

[*The One who is God said,*] “*Yet the house of Israel says, ‘The way of the LORD is not just.’*”

O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?” Ezek. 18:29

Let us pray... O God,

We would like our world to be that Beloved Community that is possible,

but it seems so often we are blocked by differences of opinion
about what that should even look like.

Help us to at least find common ground about what the problem is –
and then be willing to forgive each other
in the messy work of bringing forth our solutions.

Amen

This is World Communion Sunday and you would think that the world’s
Christian leaders had finally figured out by now that ‘the Lord’s table’
should *at least* be open to *all* Christians in *all* churches.

For the United Church of Christ that is already where we are at –
well at least in *theological* theory, where we anticipate a time
when all God’s people – and then some,
will freely choose to sit down at the same table of fellowship.

That means *anybody* who comes forward to receive the bread & cup are welcome.

Yet, I can see how people of other faiths, would be uncomfortable to participate
in our Holy Communion – to partake of the Bread & Cup
where we use the language of the Body & Blood of Christ.

Even some Christians struggle with how to understand Holy Communion.
Like Baptism, Holy Communion is one of our distinctive ‘family traditions’
as Christians, which define us as a particular people of God.

The elements of Bread & Cup have their own potency – kind of like medicine,
which are not to be trifled with out of disrespect.

This is not to say that God would smite someone who did something disrespectful,
like striking them with lightning.

No, the real consequence of such behavior would be the failure to recognize
that which is good and at work in the Christian community.

To fail to recognize the good at work in someone or some group or something,
is to be guilty of that Unforgivable Sin against the Holy Spirit of truth and love.
Unforgivable... that is, until a person gets insight on a situation and softens
their hearts enough to “see” with their hearts.

Until then, prejudice that gives rise to fear, deception, and hatred –
‘my way or the highway’ thinking, remains unforgivable.

Willard, p.2

That is one of the uses of confession – to help us get perspective on our behaviors and with this insight, turn from what is false and hurtful, and embrace the love and acceptance we already have from our God.

One of the great passages in our Bible about the dynamics of forgiveness is found in our lesson from Ezekiel 18 this morning.

There is more in this chapter about the back and forth for how the bad person who does right will live, but a good person who does evil will die – and that in utter exasperation, God finally responds, as if to say, *Again[!], when a wicked [person] turns away from the wickedness [they have] committed and does what is lawful and right, [they] shall save [their] life.*

Yay, God !

This Ezekiel 18 passage is a key for unlocking what Jesus meant by forgiving someone even ‘seventy times seven times’

When Peter asked Jesus about how many times we should forgive someone, Peter himself may have been struggling with that question personally – and looking for an excuse if not just some practical advice!

He was probably on his “sixth time” – and his last nerve, in having to forgive somebody in his life, like Judas, or his brother Andrew, or even his mother-in-law.

But Peter very likely didn’t get the answer he wanted when Jesus said, “not... seven times, but seventy times seven” – which was another way of saying, no limit...

Not easy when we have to do the forgiving – but it also means that forgiveness is there for us, too.

Another reference about God’s forgiveness for us is in the Lord’s Prayer, where it says,

‘Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors’ and as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, in words to this effect: “So now, if you forgive others’ transgressions, shouldn’t your Heavenly Guardian forgive you?

It follows that if you do not forgive others, neither will your Heavenly Guardian forgive your transgressions.”

This seems to be in keeping with what the following passage means from today’s Gospel lesson:

...whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Willard, p.3

It so happens, our lectionary reading for this week was for a different Gospel text, but the Ezekiel reading allowed me to include the Gospel from that Sunday when we were closed for Hurricane Irma – along with the teaching about forgiving “seventy times seven.”

My sermon title that Sunday, was “Conflict Resolution”

so I get to revisit that part of the lesson about the process Jesus suggested – or even commanded for how we are to work out disputes within the Christian community.

Sad to say, but churches do not necessarily conform to God’s Kingdom of Heaven – is that a surprise?

Nevertheless, we strive for that Beloved community that is possible as a social reality, ‘on Earth as it is in Heaven’.

In recent years, we have incorporated into our own system of church governance a ‘behavioral covenant’ that came to us through Jean Bryan (McClure) from her church in Danville, VT.

It is in keeping with Jesus’ guidance for conflict resolution:

God has called us together as a living congregation.

*We follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, who commands us to
‘love your neighbor as yourself.’*

We desire to be a vibrantly healthy and compassionate Christian community.

*To this end, we covenant together to make every effort
to relate to each other in the following ways:*

*We will be respectful of each other by
listening well,*

*going with any concern directly to the appropriate person,
having a civil demeanor,
having a kind heart,
honoring each other in appropriate ways.*

*We will be accepting of each other by
tolerating differences,*

*showing concern for feelings,
seeking to understand each other’s position,
being honest, open and direct with each other.*

*We will be considerate of each other by
showing humility,*

*being gentle,
protecting personal information,
protecting each other’s reputation –
in the congregation, in our encounters in the wider world.*

Willard, p.4

Though not on the list, there is an essential pre-requisite that is implied for this covenant to work, and that is: Forgiveness.

Perhaps you saw the movie, “Love Story” with Ryan O’Neal and Ali MacGraw and remember the line, ‘Love is never having to say you’re sorry.’

Friends, love is *all about* forgiving even those who never say they are sorry – at least the love that Martin Luther King and Jesus were talking about.

That does not mean letting someone off the hook of their responsibility.

Judgment comes, recognized or not, and there is no mercy

with “Mother Nature’s” law of Cause & Effect –

until you come to terms with the mechanisms of the ‘cause’ in question.

However, people of faith have the additional help that comes from unseen options made available through humility – a willingness to be forgiven and repent, as well as a willingness to forgive even one’s enemies.

To forgive in order to heal – which is another way of talking about salvation, is represented in the healing stories of Christ,

which I believe is God’ strategy for providing an entry point to the Kingdom of Heaven, now and not just in the time to come.

What we must recognize is that we have to keep forgiving if we are to go forward, we have to be willing to cross the abyss of ignorance if we are to reconcile the wounds of fear, deception, and hatred, especially when dealing with those who are infected with ‘cognitive certainty’- the conviction that they are right beyond a shadow of a doubt. Such people remain in their guilt, at the mercy of “Mother Nature” – the physical world of cause & effect, and at the mercy of others who have the same extreme convictions.

It is my opinion that – the stories of Christ demonstrate that God’s strategy for human salvation, is to forgive us, first, in order to heal us; Perhaps even before that, we must love even our enemies, enabling us to forgive them.

Forgiveness remains an essential ingredient preserved in our commemoration of Jesus’ Last Supper liturgy as we break bread and share ‘the cup of forgiveness’.

Forgiveness is an important thing to remember and put into practice in our daily lives – even if it takes us seventy times seven times!

Amen

*Our scripture lesson today from Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-29 describes
the dynamics of forgiveness in God's relationship with us...*

¹The word of the LORD came to me again:

²“What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel,
‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes,
and the children’s teeth are set on edge’?”

³As I live, says the Lord GOD,
this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel.

⁴Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the [parent]
as well as the soul of the [child] is mine: the soul that sins shall die.

²⁵“Yet you say,
‘The way of the Lord is not just.’

Hear now, O house of Israel:

Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?

²⁶When a righteous [person] turns away from [their] righteousness
and commits iniquity, [they] shall die for it;
for the iniquity which [they have] committed [they] shall die.

²⁷Again [!], when a wicked [person] turns away from the wickedness
[they have] committed and does what is lawful and right,
[they] shall save [their] life.

²⁸Because [they] considered and turned away from all the transgressions
which [they] had committed, [they] shall surely live,
[they] shall not die.

²⁹Yet the house of Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’

O house of Israel, are my ways not just?

Is it not your ways that are not just?

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Matthew 21:23-32

[Jesus said,]

¹⁰ “See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my [Abba] Father who is in heaven.

¹² What do you think?

If [someone] has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, [don't they] not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?

¹³ And if [they find] it, truly, I say to you, [they rejoice] over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.

¹⁴ So it is not the will of my [Abba] Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

¹⁵ “If your brother [or sister] sins against you, go and tell [them their] fault, between you and him [or her] alone.

If [that person] listens to you, you have gained [them] as your brother [or sister].

¹⁶ But if [that person] 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 [they refuse] to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if [they refuse] to listen even to the church, let [them] be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my [Abba] Father in heaven.

²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him,

“Lord, how often shall my brother [or sister] sin against me, and I forgive [them]? As many as seven times?”

²² Jesus said to him,

“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”