

Matthew 18:15-20

Where wholeness begins

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The most difficult journey is the step toward forgiveness and reconciliation. If it were not so, Matthew would not have included this teaching in his gospel. But the truth for each of us is that when relationships are broken, it is easier to let them remain so. It requires less from us simply to walk away, engage in emotional cut-offs or retreat into that hot, smoldering place in the heart that you might as well name as hell because the effect on you couldn't be worse than some other hell you imagine where others go.

It's remarkable the courage that is required to maintain relationships that are honest and growing in those practices that bring peace, love and gratitude. This courage is even more needed in communities like congregations or places of work not to mention the fractured relations in the country. The wisdom of Matthew is to begin with the relationships close to us in the communities to which we belong. The congregation, the work place, and perhaps, especially the family, are where each of us gains practice in forgiving one another and mending our broken relationships.

Days can drift into years avoiding the difficult conversations that have to occur for wholeness to be present. Wholeness - restored relationships - then can be forgotten as the brokenness becomes the normal way of life rather than a sad perversion of all that our hearts yearn for. And you know when that happens the toxic effect is not only on the closest ones, it leaks into all the relationships of life including the congregations and communities to which you belong. That is the insight of Jesus and the concern of Matthew. What needs to be done now to restore the wholeness that God intends for us all? That question - how to have wholeness in our relationships - is at the core of the gospel; answering it lands us right in the nexus of shame, vulnerability and courage.

Wherever there is a breakdown in relationships there is hidden shame. Shame that I have proven once again what a loser I am. Shame that I have done again the very thing that I didn't want to do but invariably do, which proves what I

secretly know, I'm a failure. It's merely that I failed, I am a failure. Some version of this shame resides deep in the heart of everyone. Yet, to say that out loud causes you to flinch because few things feel worse than shame and who wants to admit that you feel it? Yet, it is within us and it's presence always near the core of all our brokenness including broken relations in our lives. And by the way, the phrase "shame on you" is one of the worst curses you can wish on anyone. Chances are likely the person you wish to shame is already experiencing hidden shame. The last thing we need is more shame heaped on anyone.

The path toward wholeness - what Brene Brown calls wholeheartedness - is an arduous path of honesty about our lives, the vulnerability to be exposed and the courage to walk in a new direction. One could say that the whole of the spiritual life is the path from shame to wholeness. The traditional Christian language is the path from sin to salvation, from estrangement to reconciliation.

Matthew imagines a communal practice for the congregation I think it works for all our relationships. There is a certain risk involved in going to the one who has wronged you or the community. The risk is real; it requires vulnerability to name the wrong and expose the shame that resides hidden somewhere. This is why it is so often ignored, leaving smoldering toxic passive aggressive relations to continue to wreak havoc on marriages, families, congregations and communities.

The path toward restored relations is the practice of honestly talking with one another. And yes Matthew tells us it requires the courage to confront bad behavior. If you can get to the heart place of owning your own pain and shame, humility arises. Humility with courage to confront is the way to wholeness. The courage to confront without the humility of heart, rarely does any good and often only increases the depth of shame. But humility with courage - risking being vulnerable with another - is the hard practice of reconciliation. Does it always work? Of course not; nothing always works. But that is no reason not to do what is right.

After all, doesn't Jesus say wherever 2 or three of you are gathered I am there with you? Remember that is the context of this whole practice of reconciliation, it's not just comfort for a church gathering when only a few show up. The gospel

reminds us that Jesus is mysteriously present with us even in these intimate encounters that show all the rough edges of our life together. To be vulnerable with one another, daring to speaking truthfully, is implicitly an act of trust that Jesus is present with us.

Honestly, I am grateful for those persons in my life, including my wife and daughters, and dear friends, who dare to speak honestly when I have done what is wrong, failed and fallen. Such conversations are never easy but they always lead toward healing and wholeness. Here again you see the practice of vulnerability and courage that Matthew describes.

While considering this passage, a poem came to me from a colleague reflecting on the same. It's so good that I need to share it with you.

Well, don't go for "sin" or "fault:"
it's too easy, and useless, to judge.
But pay attention to "hurt."
Defy that voice of false politeness
and the repression of the truth.
If someone hurts you,
go toward them, not away,
and name the hurt.
Neither hide nor retaliate, even politely:
simply, gently tell the truth.
Claim your part of it,
even if just to receive it,
and to give them access to their part of it.
Not to nail them, not to relieve yourself,
but because you love them.

Be prepared to listen—
to their journey, and to your own.
Think of it as opening a door
to a place neither of you have gone before,
and can't without the other.
Think of it as opening the door to that Jesus place.

Imagine how refreshing the air would be
in a community of open, caring honesty,
without that hidden bucket of hurts
fermenting under the kitchen sink.

In the dark places where our hurts lie
is the tomb from which Christ rises, alive,
the very Christ who,
wherever two or three are gathered in his love,
is among us.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.