

Loosing My Religion

Good Morning! If you are just tuning in and haven't heard about my accident or seen my beautiful visage for a while you might be a little frightened and tempted to change the channel. It's understandable but I hope you'll stay with us here for a bit longer and I promise to keep this message to a reasonable time. I do want to let you know that while things on the outside may look a little rough, on the inside I'm confident that there is good bone growth and repair happening. I broke the first vertebrae in my neck going over the handlebars mountain biking and am very thankful that the recovery looks promising at this point. In a couple of weeks, I'll be able to free myself from the collar and start to work on regaining strength in the neck muscles and shoulder. Thank you for all your prayers and support. It has meant a lot to me and my family.

One of the years that I was in college in Winnipeg I rented a room with 2 other students who were also attending the University of Manitoba. One of them had a 12-speed bike that I began to borrow when the snow began to melt in the Spring. It was a nice way to get back and forth from the campus to our place and my roommate never seemed to use it so I took full advantage of having this fast mode of transport. The semester ended and when I returned in the fall I moved back onto our college campus. Soon I began receiving messages from my old roommate asking me where his bike was, he couldn't find it in the garage where we kept it. I answered him back saying that the last I knew it was right back in the garage where it belonged. Now, my memory isn't the greatest anyway, but I'm sure that after a whole summer off and back in Victoria before returning to Winnipeg, the chances of me remembering anything about the bike are very slim. The truth is I didn't want to face up to taking responsibility for losing the bike. The more I ignored my roommate's request to find the bike, the more angry he became. Until

finally one day he showed up at my door. "Either you pay me the value of the bike or I'm going to take you to small claims court."

I was shocked. How could this little misunderstanding become such a big deal? I realized that to me it wasn't a big deal, but to my roommate well, he was out a bike, and he was frustrated that someone who had lost something of his wasn't taking responsibility to make it right.

Deep down I knew that I should've dealt with it early on. But I ignored it, I ignored him, hoping that it would go away. It wasn't until he came to me face to face that I understood how serious this was and how hurt he was that I wasn't doing anything about it.

Have you ever had to confront somebody that had done something wrong to you? Maybe it's unresolved and is still difficult to think about. Maybe someone confronted you with something you had done to them? How did you receive that? Were you able to resolve the conflict?

In our passage this morning we are invited to think about a very important dynamic of what it means to be in relationship together as Christians. Jesus encourages his disciples that if anyone wrongs them there is a proper way of addressing it. In fact, this process involves 4 steps:

1. Go to them face to face (and if that doesn't work)
2. Go to them with two witnesses (and if that doesn't work)
3. Go with them to the assembly/church leaders (and if that still doesn't work)
4. Treat them like a Gentile or a Tax-collector (this is an interesting statement given the context of Jesus' connection with gentiles and tax-collectors in the gospels and the context of the parable of the lost sheep which may caution us as to how harsh he intends this instruction).

Now on paper in point form that seems pretty straightforward but we all know that dealing with conflict or confronting someone in how they've wronged you doesn't often go so well.

And we also know that the most effective technique in dealing with conflict is Avoidance.

Oh yes. Isn't avoidance magnificent. It's so much easier to not deal with something that you know you have to deal with isn't it. The problem is that avoidance is only effective for a short period of time but then the problem continues and gets worse. Or our response to it gets worse. You see not dealing with a wrong that has been done to us means that rather than it being resolved and worked through we can withdraw, and complain, gossip, hold a grudge, cut someone off, ghost them, and carry on with our lives as if they don't matter. And what would we do with all the time we have if we couldn't complain and gossip and hold grudges?

Now one of the dynamics that makes it difficult to understanding Jesus' teaching in Matthew is that we live in a culture of increasing individualism. If you aren't convinced of that try comparing the search results you get on your computer with a friend's. Or open up your social media and compare it to someone else's feed. What we see and read every day is filtered through elaborate algorithms to cater to our unique interests and our consumer habits. Companies are so eager to discover what we care about and what we are looking to buy that the selling of our information has become a 200 billion dollar industry. Just even having your email address is thought to have a value of \$90 to many companies.

Now, there's no question that we enjoy some of the benefits of living in a world where the things that we like and want are floated to us on a silver platter. But it's easier and easier to live in this world with a sense of autonomy as if the things you do, don't really affect others around you.

Perhaps our online connected world has helped us feel more communal in some ways. But I think this feeling is often a false sense of connection. Or a distanced connection.

We can connect and interact in very meaningful ways with people all around the world, but how does that contribute to our sense of face to face connection and community that is so essential to our well-being?

And if we try to think beyond the individualism that dominates our worldview today we might imagine that in the first-century church things were very different. The idea that you could make decisions and conduct activities without thinking about how it would affect your family, your neighbourhood, your town, even how it would affect your nation, would have been a bizarre idea.

Jesus recognized that face to face connection and a restorative community is important. He knew that the only way the kingdom of God was going to be lived out in the world was through a group of people who were committed to God and committed to each other. But he also understood that there would be times when his followers disagreed, argued, cheated, stole from, lied to, slandered, and hurt each other. How would the community that was so connected to each other be able to work through some of these difficult offences without exploding?

Jesus' encouragement is to take your problem to the source. How many times do we try to solve problems with people without actually talking to them? It's so easy isn't it to complain to a friend about another friend, or a co-worker about another co-worker, or even seek to deal with an issue through another family member. So many things are simplified in going to the source. We gain clarity. We don't allow time and frustration to amplify the issue. Other issues don't arise because of tension around the initial offense. When somebody has wronged you -- go to the source and address it.

Secondly, if they don't listen perhaps it's time to bring others with you. In Jesus' day it was common to appoint people you respected to be arbiters over some of these disputes. Two or three witnesses that could be counted on as judges who would be able to objectively hear the complaints and weigh in on what seemed a reasonable consequence. Each party would nominate his own judge, someone they know to be impartial; and these two would try to settle the problem. You can easily imagine that if you chose an "impartial" friend and your accuser chose an "impartial" friend you might still find yourself at a disagreement for how to resolve things. So we see the third judge being brought in by the other two perhaps to resolve the stalemate.

But of course, even if there is a decision handed down by these friends and members of the community the offender may still choose to ignore it. All of us have stubbornly refused the advice of friends and family and at times ignored what we knew we should do. And so Jesus advises that there is a place and time to come together as a community, as the assembly, as the church to address a dispute.

Church discipline is not the most popular topic for sermons these days. Perhaps witnessing the misuse and abuse of institutional power throughout the Church's history has given us an aversion to exercise and embrace the influence that we have. Perhaps a leaning towards grace and love and forgiveness feels better. And perhaps we all feel hypocritical addressing someone else's wrongdoing when we realize we are prone to the same mistakes.

That being said. It seems like the Church has an important role to play in being the final word when all else has failed. It is a role that may encourage and enforce the judicial rulings that have already been suggested. It is a role that may encourage the offender to take the necessary steps to reconcile and make things right. In the end, it is a role

that is most interested in reconciliation and the restoration of fellowship in the community.

Fortunately, I haven't had to be a part of many Church discipline meetings. But, I have seen the uncomfortable way that some people respond when leaders of the Church attempt to address something that needs correction. Many times they are stubborn and refuse to listen. They are offended that the Pastor and Church would have been brought into it at all. And sometimes they leave with resentment and anger towards the Church itself.

But sometimes... sometimes God is able to shake off the blinders from our eyes because the pastor, or a leader, a family member or friend, has taken the time to speak the truth in love.

In verse 18 Jesus says: "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."

The Jews had a practice of halakha which literally means the walking out of the law. The Torah was not just the first 5 books of the Bible but was the wisdom and application of the scriptures. The walking out of the law - Halakha was the result of thinking about, discussing, and applying the scriptures to everyday life. The Rabbi's and Pharisees would sometimes say that they were "binding" something in walking out the law - meaning that it wasn't allowed. Or they were "loosing" something that they had decided was permitted by the law. Sometimes these discussions would take place because of new technologies or cultures that were introduced into Jewish life.

Sometimes we take this verse out of context and apply it to something that we are praying about or something that we want to see changed in the world. It's pretty clear from the context that binding and loosing has

to do with the agreements of the two parties that are having a dispute. They are agreeing that something is bound by the law or is permitted by the law.

Jesus means something more like whenever you agree about something together it will be backed up by my heavenly father. Whenever we come together and we've got a problem between us but by God's grace we face up to it, and allow the wisdom and counsel of others to inform us, and perhaps even if worse comes to worse the Church tells us what to do, and we agree together and resolve the issue and restore relationship then God is well pleased. Heaven will back that up anyday!

Now please don't take this message and think of all the people whose wrongs need to be called out. I think if we read this passage and use it as license to name everybody else's sin we might be missing the point. If you read the passages surrounding this you realize that Jesus' is calling for restoration that flows out of compassion and forgiveness.

In the parable of the lost sheep he is expressing a compassion that doesn't allow the outsiders to be forgotten or cut off from the community. And in the parable of the unforgiving servant it is clear that our default position as Christians should always be a deep-seated understanding that God has forgiven us. Compassion and Forgiveness must always encompass the way in which we address someone who has wronged us.

We should remember and imitate his shepherd love for us even as we face difficult disagreements and conflict with others.

Today Pastor Ron Corcoran and Rachel Simmonds are going to lead us in a special time of communion and talk about what communion means and why we eat bread and drink juice or wine to celebrate together.

