

“Tough Love”
Matthew 18:15-20
Sunday, September 4, 2011
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Today’s topic – “tough love” – is a really difficult one. It’s a tough one. And so, as usual, I want to begin with an attempt at humor. I draw on the writings of King Duncan, who mentions the comic strip, “Andy Capp,” in which:

“...the principal character is a chronically unemployed cockney ne'er-do-well who spends most of his days playing soccer and most of his nights at the corner pub, both of which drive his long-suffering wife, Flo, up the wall. In one episode, Andy is pacing the floor while Flo stands with her arms crossed.

“Finally, she breaks the silence: ‘Three whole days without speaking. This is ridiculous.’ In the next frame she says to Andy, ‘I’m sorry I acted the way I did . . . you were right. Friends?’ A bit nonplussed, Andy says, ‘OK, friends.’

“Flo hugs him and gives him a kiss on the cheek. As Andy leaves the house, he meets one of his soccer buddies, who says, ‘I’eard that, Andy. It takes a good woman to apologize when she is in the wrong.’

“As they walk down the street, Andy reflects on Chalkie's remark and replies, ‘It takes a better one to apologize when she's not.’”

In today’s scripture reading Jesus gives us advice on dealing with conflict within the Church. As I said, this is a tough topic! Many people give advice about dealing with conflict; the actual work of reconciliation is far more difficult. Jesus does not promise that there will be

no conflict among the disciples or within the Church. He does give us a plan for how to deal with conflict in ways that are different from the ways of the world. His advice is helpful, not only for our dealings within the Church, but for our family relationships, and even for our internal relationships with our own psyches.

I. Sweet

I like how Leonard Sweet summarizes Jesus' advice. He describes 5 easy – or not-so-easy! – steps for resolving church conflict:

1. Put Your Complaint into Words
2. Tell the Person about It in Person
3. Counsel with Other Wise Christians.
4. Make Use of the Christian Fellowship.
5. Never Give up Trying.

That last item – “never give up trying” – actually appears in verse 22, where Jesus tells Peter he is to forgive another church member who sins against him seventy-seven times. Not the seven times Peter suggests, but seventy-seven times! – this is how much we are to forgive a fellow Christian who sins against us. I'll read the list of 5 steps one more time for you; it's a helpful summary:

1. Put Your Complaint into Words
2. Tell the Person about It in Person
3. Counsel with Other Wise Christians.
4. Make Use of the Christian Fellowship.
5. Never Give up Trying.

We would each do well to write this action plan on a 3X5 card and carry it in our wallets.

Randy L. Hyde, in his book, Two or Three, summarizes C. S. Lewis' description of Hell from Lewis' book, The Great Divorce. Hyde writes:

“C. S. Lewis, the great Christian apologist, draws a stark picture of hell. Hell is like a great, vast city, Lewis says, a city inhabited only at its outer edges, with rows and rows of empty houses in the middle. These houses in the middle are empty because everyone who once lived there has quarreled with the neighbors and moved. Then, they quarreled with the new neighbors and moved again, leaving the streets and the houses of their old neighborhoods empty and barren.

“That, Lewis says, is how hell has gotten so large. It is empty at its center and inhabited only at the outer edges, because everyone chose distance instead of honest confrontation when it came to dealing with their relationships.

“Look, she's the one who said that about me. Let her come and apologize!”

“We may go to the same church, but that doesn't mean I've got to share a pew with that so-and-so!”

“It'll be a cold day in July before I accept his apology.”

“That's all well and good, I suppose... if you don't mind living in hell.

“Are we really so willing to give up our relationships with others – relationships that have come about and been forged by our desire to follow Jesus? Nowhere, and I do mean nowhere, in the New Testament gospels will you find Jesus saying that the first order of things is always to be right. But he does have a great deal to say about forgiveness, about relationship, about reconciliation, about service and humility and vulnerability.

“He makes it sounds like family, doesn't he?”

II. Sojourners

The Sojourners Community is a group of Christians that, since the early 1970's, has been committed to working with the poor of Washington, D.C. They have also been committed to a lifestyle of Christian community, with many members of the group living in a house in a poor neighborhood where they serve. Early in our marriage Roy and I would subscribe to Sojourners magazine, attend Sojourners conferences, and participate in Sojourners events in D. C.

Jim Wallis is founder and editor of Sojourners magazine, and founder of the Sojourners community; he also works as a spiritual advisor to President Obama. He writes here about a Sojourners' perspective on tough love:

“We have learned at Sojourners that we have nothing more to share with the world than what we are sharing with each other. I have also learned important things about reconciliation. Like all communities, Sojourners is made up of diverse people. We come with different personalities, backgrounds, temperaments, and political and spiritual traditions. To be reconciled one to another must be a primary commitment. Otherwise, there would be no community. A commitment to reconciliation requires doing whatever is necessary to remain in fellowship with one's brothers and sisters. Nothing is hidden in life together; all of our hurts, fears, sins, joys, struggles, and hopes are exposed. When this creates difficult relationships, and we avoid the necessary reconciliation, we have failed. The implications are large, for we cannot hope to reconcile in the world that which we cannot reconcile in our own lives.”

This is such a tall order. It depends on so many factors. For reconciliation to occur, two parties must agree to work through their differences. One party can, alone, only do so much to heal a rift that the other party is unwilling or not ready to heal. Sometimes healing is not possible by our human means; we can only pray for God to move in a mighty way.

The Sojourners community itself has gone through many irreconcilable differences. Jim Wallis divorced his first wife who was, at one time, a member of the community and an associate editor of the magazine. The community started in Illinois in the early '70's but broke apart. Some members of the community moved to Washington, D. C., and reestablished Sojourners there.

Being the Church is a daily calling, and often it is a struggle and a challenge. This is why we have disciplines and practices such as prayer and worship and Bible study. This is why we try to follow a biblical process such as the one outlined in Matthew 18 when we run into conflicts.

Jesus sees us as we are. He doesn't expect us to be perfectly loving at all times. In fact, he plans for the opposite. He gives us spiritual practices -- a spiritual walk -- that can help us to stay on track.

In his book, The Church, Edward F. Markquart writes:

“Martin Luther said a similar thing when he wrote: ‘O Lord, deliver me from Christian churches with nothing but Christian saints in them. I want to remain in and be part of a church which is a little flock of faint-hearted people, weak people, who know and feel their sin, their poverty, their misery, and they believe in the forgiveness of God.’ That is what Luther wanted. Nothing about colorful programs. Nothing about great music. Nothing about great preaching. What Martin Luther wanted was to be part of a community which had faint hearted and weak people who know and feel their need for forgiveness. Luther wanted to be part of a real family, a Christian family, a small family that cared for each other.”

I don't know about you, but I often feel faint-hearted, weak, and in need of forgiveness. Pretty much on a daily basis. Thank God for the Church, the Christian family, where we are

committed to one another. Sometimes our work is hard; sometimes our work is a piece of cake. Always, our work is a joy, because we do it in the name of Jesus Christ, calling on the power of His Holy Spirit.

Closing.

I want to say something, in closing, that is related, but a bit off topic:

The toughest thing about Jesus' love is that He does love us. He loves us so much that it can be unbearable at times. The degree of undeserved, unearned, freely-given love to which He subjects us is often more than our poor hearts and minds and bodies can metabolize. It is too much to physically contain.

Jesus' outpouring of love for us has an intensity that we cannot sit with for long. We can receive it in small doses -- maybe for one hour a week on a Sunday, maybe for 15 minutes a day in prayer, maybe for a moment of joy and acceptance in conversation with a friend in Christ.

What's "toughest" about tough love is the Love. We cannot control it. We are not in charge of it. We can only be open to receiving it.

Martin Luther says it like this:

"At home in my own house there is no warmth or vigor in me, but in the church, when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through."

Come to the Table this morning. Receive Jesus' outpouring of Love for you.

Amen.