

**Message: “Where There are Two or Three”**

**In the past, I’ve shared how I came back to faith at the age of 42.** Thank you, Lord! This was 23 years ago in 2000. And my life hasn’t been the same since. I also shared how I began to unlearn bad habits and learn good habits. This wasn’t easy. It took time. My story connects to our scripture, Matthew 18:15-20. By God’s mercy and with your grace, I’m going to share one, small but meaningful vignette.

**There’s no easy way to say it: I had a DUI in 2003.** This resulted in a head-on collision with the car of a young family. Everyone was injured. I was in the wrong. Yes, there’s a back story and circumstances, but I make no excuse and place no blame on anyone but myself. I missed the mark. People were hurt because of me. I’m not being harsh, just truthful.

**I was filled with remorse.** I knew I’d done wrong. I worried about the family. The police took my driver’s license, and my car was totaled. I worried about how I’d make ends meet.

**I don’t tell you this story for pity but to learn.** I was a shepherd for the church, one of the lay members who worked with the pastor to care for the congregation. Two days after the accident, the pastor called and asked me to meet him in his office.

**I didn’t know what would happen.** I was familiar with Matthew 18. I knew about discipline. Based on my prior experiences in churches, I fully expected to be asked to leave the congregation.

**Pastor Callaway asked me what happened and then he listened.** He asked me how I felt, what I thought should happen. He asked if I was sorry. I said “yes,” and I told him I was willing to make amends. He prayed for all involved. Then the pastor said he’d meet with the other shepherds, and they’d talk about it. No promises were made.

**A couple of days later, I met with the pastor again.** He told me what they’d discerned through discussion and prayer. My membership was never questioned. That was a relief. They acknowledged my attitude of remorse, so they kept me in my role, but took my duties away. They wanted to see real change. And the spiritual leaders asked me to make

amends in a particular way: they asked if I'd openly and willingly share my story with the congregation as it unfolded.

**I felt so grateful.** And I still do. What a marvelous lifeline this was. I agreed. And so, I began a two-year spiritual journey. I felt restored and reconciled, though broken. I knew I needed mercy and grace.

**I'd love to say what followed was easy.** It wasn't. There were many ramifications. There were fines, fees and lawyers to pay. I wrote a letter of apology to the family. I didn't have a driver's license for two years and had to ask for a ride everywhere. I struggled with guilt. I found it hard to forgive myself. And I shared what I was learning with those who came to hear at the church. They listened and affirmed our shared experiences of God. Over time, I re-established trust.

**The biggest challenge to overcome was my ego, my pride.** It didn't matter whether I had good intentions, I missed the mark. It didn't matter if I was a good person, I did wrong and harmed others. It didn't matter what my role, title or position was, I sinned against God. It takes time to admit the truth to yourself and then be willing to admit it to God. But we only really heal when we find the courage to admit it to other people, particularly those we hurt. Without doing so, we live half a life in fear.

**God's grace set me free, and God's grace will set you free as well.** I took a step toward God because of what Pastor Callaway, the spiritual leaders and the members of the congregation offered me. And I noticed this practice of mercy and grace, of reconciliation, was given to everyone who passed through the doors in need.

**I expected judgment and discipline.** They offered mercy and reconciliation. I expected closed minds and closed doors. They offered open hearts and open doors. I expected rejection and hurt. They offered forgiveness and hope. If they hadn't, I wouldn't be here today. Amen.

**This experience changed the way I understand Matthew 18:15-20.** All my life, I'd heard it as the "discipline" passage. I knew people who were asked to leave a church. I knew people who were shunned by decree of their community of faith. I also knew the passage has been misused to control, deceive or harm others, particularly those who have different views. And it has been used to support racism and injustice.

**Until I experienced it, I never understood the work of the church is reconciliation.** Maybe our function isn't to discipline or enforce rules, but to reconcile people to God, to a community of faith and to their family and neighbors. Maybe it's the work of unconditional love.

**This is the work Jesus did all the time.** Mark records one occasion, "*Jesus sat down to eat at Levi's house. Many tax collectors and sinners were eating with Jesus and his disciples. Indeed, many of them had become his followers*" (Mark 2:15).

**The Pharisees' response:** "*Why is he doing that?*" (v16). This also gives us a new take on Matthew's narrative, "*If they [the one missing the mark] won't pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector*" (Matthew 18:17). Matthew is Levi. And Matthew was a tax collector with tax collector friends who were followers.

**What did Jesus do?** He invited a tax collector to be an apostle. Oh yeah, and after a couple of reminders, Jesus heals Gentiles, travels to Gentile lands, invites them to be his sisters and brothers, and even uses the Samaritans – hated by the Jews, as a model for the attitude and actions we are to take. Maybe that's how we can treat someone in need.

**Maybe we've misunderstood the intent of Jesus' teaching all along.** Maybe we're in the business of putting lives together, of healing the breaches between people, of overcoming that which keeps us apart. Maybe it's about making sure no one feels like an outsider.

**I'm pretty sure Jesus didn't want us to compartmentalize our lives into church and non-church things.** It's the life thing. I'm pretty sure Jesus wants us to live every day as though we are in the presence of God - because we are. And we live every day as though we are loving our neighbor as ourselves - because we are.

**Yet we need reminders.** We need to take a moment and take off our worldly expectations and behaviors and put on our Spirit-filled attitudes and actions. I believe this process of reminding, of taking the time to reset our thinking and acting is why people need the church.

**Despite our history, I don't think we are given permission to cut anyone off.** We can treat sinners, the breakers of the covenant, those who miss the mark, with love and invitation. We can try to heal what is broken. We might have to change tactics in dealing with those who refuse to be a part of the community. But this is the mission laid before us by the One who doesn't condemn but forgives, even from the cross.

**This is the love of a Messiah who didn't condemn the world but came to save it** (John 3:17). Recall Paul's lesson from Romans 8 last month, "*If Jesus is for us, who can be against us?*" (v31). If the One who is our judge is our advocate, how can we not offer the same mercy and grace when we encounter others who have missed the mark?

**So, when Jesus says to treat people like outsiders, he wasn't saying to turn our back on them.** He's telling us to change tactics. And, all along, he's saying we ought to be doing this together. Reconciliation is a team effort, not an individual exercise. It's what we are about.

**So, is the function of church reconciliation?** Or is the function of church to worship God? We don't really have two functions. There is only one. It's in our reconciling that we worship God. It's in our worship of God we are healing brokenness, we are putting people back together with God and with one another. This is how grace and mercy, pardon and healing, work in our Wesleyan way of living.

**In the invitation to communion we say,** "Christ invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another." Loving Christ (worship) - repenting of sin (reconciling with God) and living in peace (reconciling with one another) are all part of the same thing - worship and reconciliation. This is a means of grace.

**We are to live, worship and reconcile openly, in an invitational way.** When we do, we are reminded: we all need a savior. We all fall short. And in a healthy church, there's evidence that living in the "being saved" community is a more holistic, more reconciling, more joyous way to live.

**Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am with them”** (Matthew 18:20). Too often we take this out of context and miss the intent. When we are doing God’s work of reconciliation, the Spirit is with us. Maybe we can lay down those old, strict, judgmental attitudes and joyfully sow seeds of faith, restoring and rebuilding our community with love. To God be the glory.

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**Matthew 18:15-20 (CEB)**

“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together. If they listen to you, then you’ve won over your brother or sister. But if they won’t listen, take with you one or two others so that every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses. But if they still won’t pay attention, report it to the church. If they won’t pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector. I assure you that whatever you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven. Again I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them.”