“***Regaining That One***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Sep. 6, 2020

**Matthew 18:15–20**

15 “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. 18Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

This is Jesus’ moral guideline for handling misbehavior in the religious community. Notice that he is not talking about the kind of situation where two people are both partly to blame, and where sensitivity and openness can lead to reconciliation. Jesus is addressing a situation where one person really did sin against another. The party who has been hurt should go to that one and “point out the fault,” hoping that the person listens, and if they do, “you have regained that one” (Matt 18:15). And this differs from a situation where two people simply need to try to understand each other. Jesus is talking about where someone really has done wrong against another, and needs to admit it. The person approaching the other has gathered their courage, and comes in good faith and even quite a bit of vulnerability, because the offending person could re-offend and be abusive, rather than admit the wrong done, and apologize for it.

The second step comes when the person fails to repent. Then the wronged party should bring one or two friends and approach the offending person again. Sometimes there is a moral force in numbers that can get through to someone, but often it is not enough, and the person will scorn the effort. That is when it has to come to the third step: bringing the matter before the congregation, where the group decides whether to banish the offending and unrepentant party from the group. Again, the assumption here is that a truly sinful act has taken place, and not just a disagreement where the need would be for arbitration and mutual understanding. Here there is a need for justice and protection of the innocent.

In the case of clear wrongdoing and an absence of repentance, the only appropriate response is to banish the offending member. That’s what’s meant by Matthew’s peculiar wording, “be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (v. 17). It means, let him be as someone not part of the community. Matthew shows his anti-Gentile bias here. Matthew has a more intense bias than the other three evangelists.

Yet Matthew preserves some important teachings, including some that are left out of the other gospels, such as this three-step method for ethical correction within the community. The three-step method is rarely practiced properly. First of all, it is hindered by hierarchy, where the lower-status person cannot hope for a fair hearing when lodging a complaint against the higher-status person.

A group culture of “be quiet and don’t make waves,” will also hinder the proper practice of ethics. Jesus’ saying assumes a more just and democratic system. You can see that democracy is assumed in the third step, where the congregation discusses, deliberates, and decides. The first two steps involve the more spiritual step of direct appeal. If moral appeal does not work, then a justice procedure must take place. The process assumes that clear-thinking people will be able to discern when there has been bullying behavior.

It is definitely an indictment of our churches, that the three-step method is not practiced in most of them because there has often been a culture of protecting the hierarchy and suppressing internal dissent. Only if we have a seriously ethical culture with open communication, can this ethical procedure function as it is meant to.

So perhaps the first step is to take ethics seriously, to not be content with abuse and mistreatment of people. The whole human race recognizes that abuse and mistreatment are wrong. Don’t we all basically recognize the Golden Rule? And yet, social structures enable it to continue. People feel resentment when they witness injustice, but that does not mean that everyone takes a stand against it.

Violence and retaliation are commonly applied to protect the powerful or to maintain a system of power. The three-step method does not work within oppressive systems. It is meant to work within religious communities.

Unfortunately, religions can sometimes become authoritarian systems, and then they hinder the function of ethics throughout the system. A church that cannot allow the three-step procedure to function is a deeply dysfunctional community, one that is not practicing the ethics of the gospel.

Practicing the ethics of the gospel means having partners who are also interested in practicing them. Besides the three-step process, there are also interpersonal techniques that help all our relationships, such as learning to pick up on signals that people are giving, being a good listener, and not always needing to be right. As Paul says, “outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom 12:10).

Let us also remember what the goal of the three-step process is. It is to “regain” a person: to regain them for healthy relationship. This includes pointing out the fault, the wrong they did, and not pretending that it didn’t happen. But the end-goal is to save the relationship, and not let it be ruined by misbehavior.

This is probably what you already are doing in your personal life. If a friend mistreated you, you probably approached them and said “what you did, it really hurt me.” If it was a serious misdeed, you probably tried to arouse their conscience, by saying “how could you do that?” Your goal is to get them to feel some remorse and to take steps to salvage the relationship. So the procedure that Jesus introduces resembles what our moral instincts already impel us to do.

But Jesus has created an actual formal structure, one that ought to be incorporated judicially in churches. There is amazing forgiveness with Jesus, and God’s mercy is unlimited, but that does not mean that people are free to mistreat others, and it does not mean that actions have no consequences.

Too bad we aren’t taught how to say the difficult things we need to say sometimes. But we all can learn how to seek reconciliation in our relationships, even in cases where it’s mostly misunderstanding, not severe enough to say that one has been sinned against. “A soft answer turns away wrath,” the Proverbs say (15:1). We can learn skills that help us in our relationships, and we can also learn the procedure that we are supposed to use if someone in the religious community sins against us. And Jesus will back up a just group decision.

Let us begin today, resolving to be true listeners to our brothers and sisters in Christ. How rich our relationships will be when we endeavor to stay in healthy and respectful relationship with our family, friends, and community. But if you’re being mistreated in the church, there is a procedure you can follow.