### “The Three-Step Method” Steve Finlan for The First Church, September 10, 2023

**Romans 13:8–10**

8Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” 10Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

**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.”

Welcome back to First Church. A happy Sunday to all of you. All are welcome here. Whatever the weather, it’s with joy that we gather together as a community in the school of love. Our love lessons today are illustrated in two very different passages.

These Scriptures lend themselves to two different sermons, one that would be about how love is the supreme commandment; the other about how to handle being mistreated in the church. Love is not absent from the second subject, but justice and functionality are emphasized, rather than love. But there is a common thread, inasmuch as each involves ethics. In the Paul passage, he presents us with the basics, for example, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor” (Rom 13:10). The Jesus passage talks about what to do if one has been wronged, offering a guide to resolve a conflict in the community.

Let’s look at the gospel passage. If one has been mistreated, has been sinned against in any way, the first step is to go to the guilty party and try to get them to admit to their sin, and to recognize its gravity. If the person does recognize what they have done is wrong, and is remorseful, then “you have regained that one” (Matt 18:15).

If the person says “can’t you take a joke?” or “don’t be such a snowflake,” then he or she is not recognizing the seriousness of what he has done. One then needs to approach the person, bringing one or two friends, to try to reason with him or her, offering forgiveness, and if you succeed, then you have won him over. But if he continues to refuse to admit the wrong, then you need to take the case before the congregation, and they have the power to expel such a person from the congregation. That’s what Matthew’s phrase “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector” (18:17) means. Matthew saw Gentiles and tax collectors as the worst sort.

It is a judicial function at that point, with the whole congregation being the judge and jury. First one starts out with a personal approach, and love can play a role even though one is telling the other that he has done wrong. The second step, bringing along witnesses, is also very personal, and love can definitely play a role, as other members strive to get through to the offender.

But the third step is more of a judicial step, and the group indeed has a right to protect itself and its members against offenders. Presumably the group could make other decisions, mandating arbitration to facilitate the process, for instance. But all power is invested in the group, and the group can decree whatever it needs to decree. I think that’s what’s meant by “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (18:18). Jesus is saying “I trust you to make appropriate decisions, even in difficult situations.”

So it is not true, as is sometimes thought, that Christians need to be helpless. They *can* take steps to see that offenders will cease to offend, at least within the congregation. The process involves both a personal and a judicial approach, the personal coming first, and the judicial being a last resort. It seems a very reasonable approach, and does not resort to the judicial route first, which can be very confrontational. And, of course, none of these steps involves violence.

Notice the process and its purpose. It is not for dealing with things that bother you, or that you wish your church would change. It’s for dealing with cases where someone has actually “sin[ned] against you” (18:15). It’s for cases of real mistreatment of someone by someone else. Jesus gives us an ethical technique for dealing with ethical infractions.

We are each supposed to do everything we can to avoid committing infractions, and that’s what the Romans passage addresses. All of the commandments, it seems to be saying, are designed to not do wrong to others, to not rob them, kill them, commit adultery with their spouses, or to envy them, which is what coveting means. Sometimes the basic expectations of proper behavior need to be spelled out, though they may seem obvious.

It is interesting that not *envying* is important enough to be one of the Ten Commandments. The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria says it is in there because envy often leads to other sins, such as robbery, so the commandment addresses the bad psychology that leads to bad actions. It is selfish desire that leads to other sins. James makes the same point in his epistle, “when . . . desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin” (James 1:15). It is good to be happy and to have self-respect with what you have now. Don’t compare yourselves to others.

All of the commandments, Paul says, are summed up by the command “love your neighbor as yourself,” which comes from Leviticus (19:18), and which Jesus quoted as half of the great love command, along with the other half, “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” which comes from Deuteronomy (Matt 22:37–39; Deut 6:5). Love will change the world. It changes all one’s relationships, and it changes the dynamic within a group.

Paul only lists four of the Ten Commandments in this passage, but people surely could think of the other six while reading it or hearing it read, and they would get the message that love is the real import of the whole list, loving God in the first four commandments, and loving one’s neighbor in the other six.

Practicing this is how to prevent ethical breakdowns in the first place. A lively community where love is practiced and people take their commitment seriously, is one that will be able to minimize ethical problems, though they will still occur. We are human and flawed, and problems will occur. But we have a procedure for handling these problems. And we have a spiritual ideal for living up to our potential, an ideal that leads us to have love and hope. Jesus is our example of how to incorporate the divine into daily living.

Are there techniques we can use today that will help love to flow? There might be more thoughtful ways to address each other than we usually use. Instead of saying “you look good today,” we might say something that addresses more than looks, for instance “I really like the questions and observations that you bring to the Bible study,” or “I really enjoy hearing you laugh; it’s very life-affirming and it always cheers me up.”

Such comments need to be genuine, of course, and fit the time and the place, but they might help make connections stronger.

What can you say that is thoughtful and affirming, and makes someone feel appreciated? I saw an example of it at the rest home on Thursday. Sonja, who works there, introduced me to one of the clients by saying “This is Loretta, she’s really sweet.” Loretta knew that Sonja really appreciated her. This might be something that comes more naturally to women than to men, but I’m sure there’s a way I can work some of this into my approach. How we communicate with each other makes a difference.

So, go forth and communicate love, however you are able. Think for a moment about the admirable characteristics of your friends, family, and co-workers. When you can, pick the moment to share your joy of friendship. Trust that the Spirit will help you.

Remember, what is done with sincerity will be recognized and appreciated. And then be ready to *receive* those thoughtful compliments when they are directed to you, in turn. Let the Spirit guide you as you build love connections. Let the circle of love grow.