

The Problem With People

On Sunday, we continued our series “Journeying With Jesus” by exploring his teachings about “life in community” in Matthew 18.

1. Warm-up question: People are life’s greatest joy and greatest problem. Wherever there are people, there will be conflict. Tell us about somebody you’ve known that you found to be both wonderful and maddening. Who comes to mind?
2. For purposes of tonight’s discussion, we’re going to define “community” as anywhere two or more people gather. Despite all evidence to the contrary, there’s part of us that believes that if we just keep uprooting ourselves and searching, we’ll eventually find an ideal community – at work, at church, in friendship circles, in extended families, and in spousal relationships. As a result, we often give short shrift to the hard work of “community building” in our haste to move on to the next possible “better” community. So let’s talk about how much we can/should expect from community.
 - a. Think about various communities in which you’ve participated – workplaces, churches, friendship circles, extended families, spousal relationships, etc. Tell us about the most wonderful community you’ve ever participated in. What made it so special? Did that community have any issues?
 - b. Now tell us about the most awful community you’ve ever participated in. What made it so awful? Did that community have any positives?
 - c. A 4th century writer said, “If a trial [arises] in the place where you live, do not leave that place. Wherever you go, you will find that what you are running from is ahead of you.” Do you buy that? Have you ever lived this quote?
3. In Matthew 18, Jesus offers two key principles for how we can address the problems we experience in community in healthy, life-giving ways. The first principle – direct dealing – is found in Matthew 18:15-17. In the NRSV translation, the passage begins with the phrase, “if another member of the church sins against you.” In the original Greek, however, the phrase literally says, “If a brother [or sister] sins against you.” In other words, the principle found in this passage can be applied to our relationship with any member of the human family – inside church or outside church.
 - a. Read Matthew 18:15-17. Can you think of a time when you practiced what Jesus preaches in verse 15, initiating a direct, private, gentle conversation to explore an issue with someone? How did that feel? How did it go? Did it make things better? Are you glad you did it?
 - b. Westy Egmont says, “Conflict plus love equals growth.” What do you think he means? Do you agree?
 - c. Why do we find it so hard to practice verse 15?

- d. None of us wants to be the kind of person who easily gives up on a relationship or a community. But we also know there are times when we need to make a change. Jesus himself acknowledges that in verse 17. How do we know when to “hang in there” and when to give up on someone or someplace?
4. Even after we “direct deal” with someone, lingering strong feelings can sometimes still make it difficult to let go, forgive, and move forward. In the second half of Matthew 18, Jesus tells a story meant to help us better psychologically position ourselves to forgive others. Read Matthew 18:21-35.
 - a. What do you make of the exchange between Peter and Jesus in verses 21-22? Are we required to forgive without limit?
 - b. In the story Jesus tells, the first slave owes his king the equivalent of \$3.6 billion dollars, which would have taken the slave 192,000 years to pay back at the average peasant wage at the time. Why do you think Jesus chose such an outrageous number?
 - c. How do you think the slave felt when the king forgave him his \$3.6 billion debt?
 - d. When the slave turns around and refuses to forgive the friend who owed him \$6,000, how does that make you feel toward that slave?
 - e. Why do you think the slave was unable to forgive his friend? What was he missing that made him unable to forgive?
 - f. Near the end of his story, Jesus refers to the “torment” that results when we refuse to forgive. Ron McManus says, “Bitterness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.” Have you ever found yourself holding on to bitterness for a long time? How did that feel? How did it affect you?
 - g. The primary point of Jesus story seems to be that, when we fully internalize the magnitude of wrongdoing for which we’ve been forgiven by God and others, it causes us to want to offer the same gift to others. By way of example, Jeff talked about how he is guilty of “murder by neglect” – wasting money that could have saved the life of a third world child. His point being: it’s impossible to live without doing some really terrible things. Do you buy that? Do you see yourself as someone who’s been forgiven \$3.6 billion worth of wrongdoing?
 - h. Jeff told how former President George W. Bush forgave a colleague who had greatly embarrassed his Administration. Bush forgave his colleague because of the empathy he felt, knowing how much God and his family had forgiven him for his wayward alcoholic years as a young adult. Bush’s actions are an example of the phrase, “Freely you have received, freely give.” (Mt. 10:8.) Have you ever experienced (or observed) a great act of forgiveness? How did that make you feel about forgiving others?