
Don't Give Up

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 10 September 2023

Exodus 12:1-14 • Romans 13:8-14 • Matthew 18:15-20



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Relations between humans are often difficult, as we all know. Some people are easy-going and don't seem to get excited about things; no matter what happens, they deal with it. They "don't sweat the small stuff," as people say. Others get upset over any comment you make, or anything that happens — to them, nothing is small. Everything stirs them up. We all know people of both types, I imagine. And extremes are frequently problematic; we don't want to be too easy-going *or* too excitable. Some things are worth getting upset about. But it isn't good for our blood pressure to have too many of those things!

We may like to think that Christians are considerate people, always acting towards each other in love and patience. But of course we're like other people. God made us all. We're like cars — we may all be different models, from different years, but

we all came from the same designer! Fortunately, our designer knows us through and through, and knows that we will get into trouble and arguments from time to time, even in the Church. So Jesus gives us counsel, and the Spirit continues to guide us.

The Gospel reading today looks at what happens when someone does some wrong against you — sins against you, as Jesus says. We are to approach the one we feel has wronged us and talk to them about it. If that doesn't resolve it, then we ask one or two other people to join the discussion; and if that doesn't work, then we go to the church, and by this Jesus means the leaders or elders of the church. It seems that Jesus expected that the matter would usually be resolved by the time we have done all this. But before we look at what happens if it isn't resolved, let's consider some other counsel from our Lord..

From earlier in Matthew's Gospel, we recall that Jesus said:

But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. (Matthew 5:39)

If we take the general case, when someone offends, you should first try to brush it off. But Jesus also said:

if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:22-24)

So we have what seems to be a variety of different cases, and yet all involve some offences between two people. What are we to do? We must separate the persons. Some of Jesus's advice applies to the offender; and some to the offended. If you are the offended party, you are to turn the other cheek — but is that only for the first time it happens? Consider also:

Then Peter came and said to [Jesus], 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

So we must forgive, and forgive repeatedly, essentially without limit. But that does not mean we should not take action, as described in the first passage we looked at — that is, speaking to the offender, getting one or two others to speak to the offender also, etc. And if that doesn't work, then what? We'll get to that.

Being the offender is different. According to Jesus, being angry brings judgment upon you; hurling insults gets you in trouble with the council; and calling someone a fool can land you in hell (that seems to be not that severe an insult — I

can think of many worse ones). Where it is leading is really the same place as before. If you have wronged your brother or sister, go be reconciled to him or her, before you do anything else — particularly before you present yourself at the altar. In days past, the confession in the church service would occur just before Communion, because it was important for a communicant to approach God with a clean heart. (In fact, confession was often made the Sunday before the Sunday when Communion was offered.) This is analogous to the state of ritual cleanliness which all the old laws in the Old Testament promoted. Be reconciled to your fellow Christian, because you are all one body in Christ, and the members of one body cannot be fighting each other.

So, when disputes or insults or other wrongs between persons arise, we are to work them out, alone or with help. But now, let's look at the last part of today's Gospel passage:

If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. (Matthew 18:17)

Gentiles and tax-collectors! Those whom the observant Jews took to be beneath notice. The Pharisees were shocked when Jesus spoke with such people, or even ate with them. The context of our reading makes it sound like, if you can't reconcile your differences, then have nothing more to do with the offender. But it can't mean that! Does Jesus ever give up on anybody? Even Gentiles and tax-collectors? No, of course not. He always welcomes them, and gives them every chance, even more than seventy times seven chances. 490 chances! As William Barclay wrote, Jesus' instruction "is not an injunction to abandon people; it is a challenge to win them with the love which can touch even the hardest heart."

And we are to do the same. Every person may join the Communion of the Body of Christ, and it is our duty to help them, no matter how long it takes. Each such person we reach with God's help and grace is another one of God's people saved and eternally blessed. Disputes will sometimes arise, even among the kindest and most faithful of people. What we should remember is that we are all one people. We naturally want to have "our way" when it comes to a disagreement, and some major divisions in the church have come about over such differences. But building the Body of Christ — the church — is our mission, and every member of the body is important. To truly serve God is to serve God's people, and to seek peace in communion and the healing of differences, through prayer and humility. Thanks be to God, from whom all peace flows. Amen.