

February 7, 2021

Dear CCC Congregation,

I have enjoyed the recent snowfall. To me, snow seems to have a relaxing element to it. It looks light and fluffy when it falls, leaving behind a sense of peace and tranquility. Unlike a thunderstorm, it creates no loud noise as it falls. The result it produces as it hangs in trees and covers the ground serves as a great reminder of the glory and sovereignty of God. God's power, along with our helplessness, is evident in a snowstorm. We find ourselves at the mercy of nature, unable to change its course. Our only recourse is to marvel at the wonder of His power and rest in the promise of His love as each covers us like the fresh snow-covered earth.

I regret not being able to be with you the last two Sundays. I find a source of strength in our gatherings each week. I have grown to appreciate the gifts each of you possess and the encouragement I receive from watching you utilize your respective gifts in service to our faith family and our community. I appreciate the sense of unity and Christian love present in our church body. The world is watching how we care for one another. I am sure we are leaving an indelible mark on our community as we reflect how Christians are to love one another. I have been unable to get to the church to record a video due to the snow. In lieu of a video, I have written a short devotion. I pray you find it practical and helpful.

A friend of mine was recently hurt by people in an organization that was created to help others. She felt slighted and underappreciated by some decisions that were made by a select few. In turn, she expressed her disappointment, and subsequent hurt, to people close to her that were uninvolved. Call it venting. Call it gossiping. Regardless of what we have the tendency to call it, was her response appropriate? Does the Bible inform us on how to address others that we feel have slighted us? Her situation was not very serious. What if it had been? What if many people were hurt as a result of the actions of a few, or actions by just one person? How are we as Christians to respond to the wrongs and injustices we face from others?

Thankfully, the Bible is not silent. Matthew recalls the words of Jesus this way, “If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won’t accept the church’s decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector”

(Matthew 18:15-17 NLT). In this passage, Matthew records three suggested approaches by Jesus, each becoming more progressive, to addressing the wrongs committed against an individual. First, the individual should confront the perpetrator of the offense directly. Our tendency is to tell others about what we have endured before we go to the source and address it directly. This methodology is the source of much division and character assassination and is rooted in pride. We often embrace the role of victim as it garners sympathy and rallies troops to our side, both of which stroke our ego. Jesus said this method is inappropriate. If we go to the source, we leave those uninvolved out of the issue they should not be involved in to begin with. Moreover, more times than not, we can become reconciled with the offender, which should be the end goal.

Going to the offending party does not always work. Many times, the offender feels justified in their actions even though they are clearly in the wrong. This mentality often leads to a refusal to admit one’s wrong and prevents reconciliation. In this case, Jesus suggested taking two or three witnesses so that the confrontation can be confirmed legally. The goal here is to prevent a ‘he said she said’ scenario, which makes reconciliation virtually impossible. The opposing parties have differing points of view and find it difficult to insert themselves into the point of view of the person they are in conflict with. Once again, a lack of empathy and humility cause the parties to ‘dig in their heels’ and fight for their respective rightness, making it necessary to get others involved to substantiate what was said and done. This method has roots in Jewish tradition. “You must not convict anyone of a crime on the testimony of only one witness. The facts of the case must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses” (Deuteronomy 19:15).

Not all conflicts can be resolved. Sometimes an agreement cannot be reached, and we must agree to disagree. It is rare, but there are also times when someone is clearly in the wrong, approached by others regarding their wrongness, but remain intent on continuing to commit the actions that are considered wrong. How did Jesus suggest addressing these rare situations? He suggested the offended party and the witnesses take the case before the church. Personally, I struggle to understand this method for two reasons. The first reason lies in a point made by William Barclay. He argues the church did not exist at the time of Christ. The church did not come to fruition until the death and subsequent ascension of Christ. Christians were first called Christians in Antioch not long after the establishment of the church as we know it. How could, or why would, Jesus suggest taking the offender before the church if the church did not exist? Was he referring to the local synagogue or temple? Or was this an insertion of Matthew since he wrote this letter long after the death of Christ? In my opinion, these are valid questions with no easy answers. The second reason relates to the lack of evidence of Jesus shaming or causing offenders to feel a sense of guilt. It seems He goes to great lengths in the gospels to do quite the opposite. Experientially, I have witnessed this phenomenon and find it ineffective and counterproductive. Shaming and guilt has a tendency to promote legalism and prohibits one from acting out of love. The offender becomes more concerned with his sin becoming public than acting in righteousness out of love for and devotion to God. I have witnessed a church member standing before a congregation and disclosing his infidelity to his wife before a large group of church members. I could not imagine the humiliation, shame, and guilt this person must have felt. Imagine if CCC knew every indiscretion you have ever committed. There is no question this would be very difficult. How would you ever feel connected to the other members of CCC if this were the case? It stands to reason this would always wreak havoc in the back of your mind as you seek to reintegrate into the congregation.

If this last method fails, Jesus suggested treating the perpetrator as a tax collector or pagan. A superficial reading makes this seem harsh. It seems as if Jesus is advising His followers to treat the offender as an outsider, rejecting him until he changes his mind. What if the opposite is true? How did Jesus treat pagans and tax collectors? A quick reading of the gospels shows he ate with them, healed them, forgave them, befriended them, and ultimately saved them. Is Jesus suggesting we treat them differently than He did? Maybe He is suggesting we love them unconditionally, much like He did. To me, this seems more logical and in line with His nature and character. It is also interesting to note this passage is followed by a situation where Jesus suggested we are to forgive our brothers as many times as we are offended by them (I do not think this is referring to perpetual behavior. We should always establish boundaries to protect and preserve our own wellbeing). This directive of continual forgiveness does not flow well with the idea of rejecting a brother who fails to repent. At what point does Jesus get fed up and reject us? If He tires of our indiscretions, I think we are all in trouble. In my opinion, this passage reflects our need to confront and forgive others as Jesus confronts and forgives us.

We have all been wronged. We have all wronged others. How do we respond when we are wronged? Do we immediately go and tell others who are uninvolved, or do we go to the source and seek reconciliation? Let us heed the advice of Jesus and go to the offender directly. Others are watching how we handle being wronged. Are we setting a good example for the world around us? Are we reflecting God's love and the wisdom of Jesus? I pray we are.

Blessings!

Derek