

IF A MEMBER SINS AGAINST YOU . . .
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 18:12-20

If I cut my finger and notice the next day that there seems to be some infection, the first thing I do is nothing. I hope it will go away, that it will take care of itself. And most of the time, it does. If it seems to get worse, then I'll try a little self-doctoring, putting on some Neosporin, perhaps, and maybe a Band-Aid. I don't know whether any of this will help, since I really don't know how infection works. But I do those things because it seems to be getting worse, and I feel like I ought to do something. Sometimes, because of my efforts, or maybe in spite of them, the infection goes away.

If the infection continues to get worse and now starts to spread to my hand, I'll go to the emergency room. "I cut my finger and it's getting worse." So the emergency room doctor tries some minimally invasive procedures, maybe putting some stronger medicine on the cut and giving me a prescription for antibiotics. And often that's the end of it.

But if it gets worse, so that the infection spreads and my whole body starts to feel bad, they may admit me to the hospital and try more serious measures. And if even that does not work, they may decide on the extreme measure of amputating the offending finger and maybe more if the infection has gone that far. They would explain that this step is necessary or else my very life would be in danger. So, although I would grieve for the loss of the finger, I would also tell them without hesitation to go ahead with the amputation, because I don't want the infection in one part of the body to kill the whole body.

Now if some of you medical folks are saying to yourselves that I've gotten some of this wrong, please just keep it to yourself. My intention is not to spell out the correct medical procedure, but simply to show that when something bad like that happens to us, we respond in the smallest way we can, and then in stronger and stronger ways as the situation gets more serious.

It is something like that which Jesus proposes when there is an infection in the body of Christ, the church. "When a member sins against you . . ." you start with the smallest step to get things back on course, and go to more serious steps as the situation gets more serious.

The other night at Bible study we used the example of gossip. Someone in the church has been saying some untrue things about you. So you start by going to the one who has offended you, just you and that other person. Lots of times that will take care of it. The other person realizes that you are offended; apologies are offered, and that's the end of it. But if it is not, you take a couple of others with you to try to work it out, and if that doesn't work you take it before the whole church, and if even that fails, the offending person is excommunicated from the community.

All of this sounds so 16th century when heretics were burned at the stake and elders would come around to visit you and decide whether or not you were worthy to take communion. We don't do that sort of thing anymore, do we?

Well, it certainly is a different day. But church people, even those who come every Sunday and sing "Holy, Holy, Holy," still do things that give offense. It is like an infection in the body of Christ. A church leader steals money from the treasury. A member stands around outside after church and hands out inflammatory tracts. An elder has an affair and everybody knows about it. Things like that happen in the church. How are we going to deal with such times?

Jesus says, Go. That may be the toughest part of this whole passage. Go, but I don't want to go. What I'd rather do is look the other way, or talk to anybody else about it but that person, or pretend I didn't notice, or just say it doesn't matter. If someone sins, if someone gives offense, the first thing I am most likely to do is—nothing. I don't want to cause a scene, after all. I would rather avoid a fuss. Besides, that's what worked with my infected finger, and most of the time that works. But in human relationships, doing nothing doesn't quite do it. There's something between you and that other person. And it doesn't smooth over on its own. You find it easier to avoid each other, because the thing is always there.

So you go. "Of course, you don't want to; of course you don't know what to say; of course it's not a good time."¹ And yet it may very well be that your reluctance to go is the best indicator of all that you should go.

You don't want to go, so you go. No soldier storming a beach, no sailor facing an enemy ship, has ever done anything that required more courage than we show when we go to someone with whom we disagree. You find yourself driving past their front door a half dozen times before you park. You pick up the phone and put it back down before you finally punch in the number. It takes courage to go.

Along with courage, there is also a word of caution which is in order. You are not going to have it out, to unload yourself of your pent-up anger, to have a tirade that might feel good but which

¹ Patrick Willson, in his sermon of 9/5/93 at St. Stephens Presbyterian Church, Fort Worth, TX.

leaves the relationship in a shambles. Jesus says you are going in the hopes that the other will listen. And for that to happen, the conversation must be reasonable and caring. I hear you; you hear me. And if it works, we begin to understand one another. “I had no idea you felt that way.” At its best you have gained a sister or a brother in Christ.

But sometimes it is not at its best. Sometimes two or three others are needed. This is the principle behind much pastoral counseling and newer movements like mediation. Sometimes two people get in such an argument that they can’t get out by themselves. Sometimes a married couple goes round and round with voices that get louder and louder. So a third party comes in to see from a different perspective and listen with a different ear and offer a different way out. And often, that helps resolve the conflict.

But sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes the thing escalates so that the whole church is involved, and people are choosing up sides. Sometimes the infection which started as a small thing between two people spreads so far that the whole body of Christ is in danger. Sometimes it is brought before the whole church. It is a process that, fortunately, is little used. But our Book of Order has a provision for a deliberate way to air these differences, for witnesses to say what they heard and saw, for judgments to be given as fairly and impartially as sinful people can manage.

And sometimes, in the most extreme cases, even this does not restore fellowship. In that case, our Book of Order provides for removing the name of the offender from the roll of the church. It is a severe step, one which seems almost to be unchristian. But this formal step only makes official what is already true: that here is one who refuses to listen to the church or to its members. In a very real way, that person has already removed himself or herself from the roll of the church.

If my finger gets infected enough that my whole physical body is threatened, I will agree to have that offending member amputated. If a conflict gets so out of hand that it infects the life of the whole community, then the community knows nothing but to remove the offender from the community. It’s a rare step; I’ve never seen it done. I hope never to see it done. If such a step is taken, it must be done not in arrogant judgment, but in the deepest humility, the recognition that the ones who pass judgment are themselves sinners, and yet we see no way to resolve the conflict but that the offender be removed. Lord, have mercy upon us.

When my finger is amputated, that is the end of it. I don’t expect ever to see that finger again. But in the church, the hope is that by the grace of God that one removed will return. Here is how our Book of Order puts it: “The purpose of discipline is to . . . correct wrongdoing in order to bring members to repentance and restoration. . . . [Discipline] should be exercised as a dispensation of mercy and not of wrath.”² As Jesus parable puts it: If one sheep goes astray and is found, “there is more rejoicing over it than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is

² D-1.0000.

not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.” That is the ultimate hope of the church’s discipline.

It’s not the happiest of topics, I know, and this passage from Matthew will never be among the most beloved of texts. But it is there because we are human, we are sinners, and sometimes we bump up against one another in ways that need to be resolved. Sometimes the bumps are minor—a little gossip, a small offense. Sometimes it is not a small bump, but a huge injury. The newspapers bring reports of people in church who have been terribly injured by church leaders through sexual abuse and in other ways. Some of those who have been thus wounded may never in this life be able to overcome the hurt that has been done them. Some of you may have suffered injuries like that, an offense so great that you don’t see any possibility of restoration or reconciliation. It is no wonder that the church has become alert, then, to its obligations to victims of such offenses. It is right that we should show that concern.

But Jesus speaks these words, not just to call attention to victim or perpetrator, but to lead us toward reconciliation. Jesus wants the community to be one. He wants us to have the courage, where we are able, to see past the offenses and be united. It’s never easy. In some cases it may not be humanly possible. It requires the reconciling power of Christ.

The author Corrie ten Boom spent World War II amid the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp. She watched several members of her family put to death. She herself was treated brutally in that setting. After the war, she tells of going one Sunday to church. She looked across the church, and to her dismay, saw sitting in the congregation a man who had been one of the most brutal guards at the camp during the war. When the service was over, she watched at the man approached her with the obvious intention of greeting her. “Lord,” she prayed, “I cannot forgive this man. Lord, I cannot shake his hand. Lord, you forgive him.” And she said that she found herself extending her hand to clasp the hand of this enemy.³

Sometimes such reconciliation is inhumanly difficult. Is it worth it? Jesus thinks it is. If a member sins against you, go if you are able. Because if that one listens, then you have gained a brother or a sister in the Lord. ☩

³ I cannot track down the source for this story.