

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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4 March 2007

Second Sunday in Lent

Matthew 5:21-24

Matthew 18:15-22

I learned a lot of lessons as a child. We all did. Many of them we don't even become aware of until much later, if at all. But one of the lessons I've always been aware of was the one that taught me, if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. And then there's the very specific image of me as a young adult driving my first car, an old car when I bought it that got much older the day it soaked in a flooded street. I remember talking on the phone with my parents' mechanic and being very frustrated by what I was hearing and how I was being treated. When I got off the phone, I said something fairly strong and very angry, to which my mother replied, don't feel that way. Put those two messages together, don't feel that way; and if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all; and I was totally set up to be nice and sweet and polite; to do my very best to not feel anger or frustration, but if, God forbid, such feelings should creep into my mind and heart, then to keep them to myself. And while it's easy to poke fun and mock that dynamic now, it's not as easy to overcome it and relate in a different way.

I've been learning a lot of hard lessons recently, but one of the loudest, strongest and most consistent is that some things have to be said if a relationship is going to be alive and vital and valuable. To try and stay sweet and nice, inoffensive and un hurtful – which can become untruthful and dishonest when you're not looking – is like covering a relationship in saran wrap. You can't do a lot of moving or living or growing, to say nothing of breathing, wrapped in saran wrap. To try and bury anger or hurt or disappointment or frustration or preference or desire or need makes relationship next to impossible, keeps it from getting real, suffocates the very life out of it. Now, the other side of that learning is that not everything needs to be said. It's the figuring out of what does that holds the challenge. When I get around to contemplating speaking the hard feelings, I tend to wrestle with questions of why: is it because I want to lash out in anger and see how deeply I can wound someone who has wounded me, or is it because I have some feelings that need to be shared, a perspective that needs to be honored, some honesty that needs to be named before any sort of relationship can go forward. All of it's hard, at least for people with my DNA.

If any or all of that's true for more people than just me, and if what I've just said relates to the challenge of one on one and personal relationships, just think about what happens in the life of community, in the life of the church. How much of our energy do we spend making nice to each other, and how much do we spend being real with each other? How many people do we avoid or ignore, and when do we decide to roll up our sleeves and do the hard work of building up relationships and encouraging understanding and nurturing a sense of pulsing, living, quality community? I've often remembered an interchange I had in one of my first congregations. The

organist really wanted to take a Sunday off so that she could go to a family wedding. We were having trouble finding a substitute for her, and were busily brainstorming options of who we might ask that hadn't already turned us down. She was about to give up the idea of the wedding when I came up with one more person's name. She looked at me and shook her head and went on to tell me about something that had happened between them 25 years earlier when they were in high school together. She explained that she hadn't had anything to do with this person since and there really wasn't any way she could ask her to play the organ for her now.

Contrast that with Matthew's report of Jesus' instruction that if someone hurts us, we should go to them and talk together in private. If those words make us squirm and seem a bit unrealistic in terms of the way we tend to function in the church, what do you make of his next suggestion: if the person doesn't listen to you when you talk one on one, then take a couple more folks with you next time you go to call. If that doesn't work, bring it before the congregation as a whole. Every time I've referred to this text around the life of any congregation, I tend to hear something about how pushy that seems, how unfair, how confrontational and harsh that feels. And yet, I think Jesus is saying something very loud and strong about how much relationships matter. One commentator observes that where Jesus is concerned:

...nobody is written off in haste, no one is fired on the spot, no one slams the door in another's face in rage; to the contrary, a sea of energy is expended trying, time and again, to make peace. In contrast to the attitudes of the prevailing culture ("If somebody hassles you, forget them. It's their problem, not yours."), relationships are of precious and enduring value in the church. When a relationship is broken, it is worth going back over and over to work toward reconciliation. (Thomas Long, *Matthew*, page 210)

Jesus ends his teaching by saying, eventually, if they won't listen or respond, let them go – let them be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector. But before we take too much comfort in that message that we can eventually give up and walk away, we need to remember how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors: he ate with them, he cavorted with them, he took no small amount of heat for keeping the door open to them. Or in other words, if the other person doesn't want to be reconciled to you, after you've given it your best shot, let them go. But the door stays open should they ever change their minds.

Community matters. The quality and honesty and richness and unity of community matters in profound ways to Jesus. Earlier in the same gospel, we hear Jesus' words that if anyone comes to the altar to present a sacrifice to God and while there, remembers that a brother or sister has something against them, they should go and be reconciled, and only then come back and present their offering. Reconciliation matters. Forgiveness matters. Building bridges and reaching out to one another and doing everything in our power to come together and to come to the table together – that's what matters and what Jesus was calling his early followers to, and what he's still calling us to.

I was deeply moved recently to read the story of the Palestinian Christian priest Elias Chacour who finally tired of presiding at the sacrament of communion in his congregation, knowing that many in the pews hated each other, had not talked with one another in years, even decades, and bore grudges dating back to the previous generation. One Sunday Father Chacour locked and barred the doors to the church. Then he told the congregation that he had no intention of presiding at the service and sacrament or of unlocking the doors until those at odds with one

another confessed their sins, offered forgiveness, and made peace. What followed, after a stunned silence, was nothing short of remarkable. A policeman got to his feet, confessed his misdeeds and asked forgiveness. Others followed. When the Lord's Supper was finally celebrated, it was no longer a mockery. It was a sacrament in which members of the congregation recognized one another as the body of Christ. (*What's Theology got to do with it?*, Anthony Robinson, page 185)

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