

We all seem to get along well at this church, yet often it is easier to hear what God has for us - as instruction, when we don't immediately need it, but to learn it for the day that we may. Today, Jesus gives us instruction for how the church ought to conduct its life together, balancing ethical judgment with loving restoration of offending persons in order that the church's unity and life might be preserved.

We know that all of us are created differently, no two people are alike. God has given each of us a 'uniqueness' which only becomes more and more evident as we grow with differing lives. All of human creation is loved by God, our Creator, no matter how different we are.

Each person is of worth and value. Each person created by the same one God, each loved by God, and no one is of more worth or value than another. Even so, what each of us perceives as the truth might look different.

I hadn't been married long to my husband, Bob, when we had our first fight. All of a sudden he was no longer speaking to me. I did not know what I had done, but he wouldn't tell me. On the first day I was confused and kept asking him to just tell me.

On the second day, I began to think that our marriage was going to be a very short one. On the third day, I broke down and cried. He finally told me what had made him so angry.

We didn't have much money, but he had seen me come home with a box of potato chips in the groceries. I assured him that I had no intention of eating them, they were to have in reserve in case someone stopped by at mealtime and I had to supplement the meal.

I told him this week that I was going to tell 'The Potato Chip Story' and he laughed and said I have corrupted him over 38 plus years, as now he often buys chips!

The point of the story is that he and I were raised in different homes and had different experiences growing up. His family in those days never had chips around; my family always had a box of chips and a can of baked beans ready to enlarge a meal for stop-by company.

I know that I have shared with some of you what I call the 'Quad Check,' the Quadrilateral that was defined by John Wesley. It is making your decisions according to historical tradition, personal experience, thought through reason, and the scriptures.

Wesley said that scripture was primary, but in our human way, we usually turn to tradition, experience and reason first, and this sometimes gets us into disagreements with other unique individuals.

Jesus knew we were each created uniquely with free will choice, and all very human. He knew we wouldn't all agree so he was coaching us in this scripture how to handle those situations. What makes us Christian isn't that we don't disagree, or hurt each other, but how we go about healing the hurts and resolving the conflicts.

Matthew 18:15 begins with this, *Step 1: If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together. If they listen to you, then you've won over your brother or sister.* When you have an issue with someone, honor them enough to go and speak to them one on one, not sharing the issue with everyone else first.

Give yourself to the situation until it can be resolved for the good of your mutual relationship and for the good of the community. The focus of this passage is on reconciliation, not punishment. We are to try and not embarrass them or shame them.

Though you may be the one offended, it should be up to you to make the first step, not waiting for the offender to move first. The perceived truth of each of you may be coming from differing experiences and traditions, even different ways of reasoning. Your offender may be thinking that you are the offender. Making the first step, may bring healing sooner.

Jesus goes on with *Step 2: But if they won't listen, take with you one or two others so that every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses.*

I was blessed to finish my seminary with an independent study through Duke Divinity School. It included a trip to England in 2005.

The study was to visit some of the 'Wesley sites' including Christ's Church Cathedral at Oxford, where the Wesley brothers studied. Also on the trip, I was doing an informal search for some of my family history.

I looked down as we entered the Cathedral and found myself standing in front of the gravestone of John Locke, one of my mother's ancestors. I began to read more about him when I got home and found that he was an important 17th Century British Philosopher and social activist. This made me real proud of this, my ancestor. What does the Bible say about pride? *Pride goeth before the fall...*

John Locke was a prolific writer and credited with being one of those who were launching the period of 'Enlightenment.' It was the beginning of the autonomous individuals. He wrote that we can think and do for ourselves according to our own wishes. We now call that a 'me-me society.'

Before that everyone worked for the good of the whole: The family unit, the church, the community. This doesn't make him a bad person, and he did advance society, but I let go of some of my puffed up pride as to my blood connection with him.

Today we are all enlightened. We like our independence, and life is often about what I want and that I'm right, not what is best for everyone involved. Yet if we go to scripture, the Apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, relates the body of Christ in this way: *One part of the body cannot say to another part of the body, "I have no need of you."*

Jesus says if you cannot resolve it alone, then bring one or two others. This actually comes from the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 19:15 *"A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed."*

Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained. Just one or two, not a gang of thugs to back you up, but open minded individuals who are wise and also intent on bringing resolution, not intimidation to the situation.

Then Jesus gives us step 3: *But if they still won't pay attention, report it to the church.* The church through time has changed. Until we were 'enlightened,' we were more like 'the body of Christ' that Apostle Paul speaks of.

Many people today wouldn't even think to go to the church to help solve their issues. I'm not sure if we are afraid of poor advice, like Job got from his friends when he was in distress, or if it is because we forget that the church could and should be pointing us to the scriptures.

As all, but Jan and myself who get paid, are here and giving of yourselves voluntarily, and each of us are of value, and we are not all like-minded, still we are not to be ruled by a few. Input should be for all who would participate.

This will cause misunderstandings and conflict. We need to come together in Christ; stay focused as Christians on Christ's teachings; coming together in a humble loving manner with humility.

As a church we can help each other through the times we all need of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation. Each step Jesus has given here is to be live out in hope of healing and restoration, one with another.

Often hurts cause people to leave a church in anger for another down the street or they quit church altogether. When either of these happen, wounds fester, the dark side succeeds, 'death still has dominion' and both parties may carry scars for years.

God's grace gets lost by the very people that God taught grace to, through Christ. In the church, disunity of a few is the disunity of all. When one is wounded we all are hurt.

So Jesus goes on with step 4: *If they won't pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector.* Our first reaction to this statement is to interpret it as an opportunity to walk away from those people. But Jesus didn't walk away, he befriended them and ate with them, listened to them and tried to gently help them find their way. Like Jesus we are called to never give up on them, never quit trying to reach out to them in love.

As a church, can we be so open to those who we want to reject? Can we be as open to those who society rejects? The difficult ones that may often be in the middle of conflict? That sure isn't easy, but Jesus never said it would be easy... Going into the risky relationships is exactly what makes us Christian.

Next Jesus reminds us how far reaching are the implications of what we do: *I assure you that whatever you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven.*

Fastening would speak of holding to the law. Loosening would determine that the law was not applicable in the given circumstances. Every week we say: "Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." When the rest of the world would walk away, we know we are set upon a different path, one that is bound in heaven as well as here and now.

And this passage of scripture ends with assurance from Christ: *Again I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them.*

Though we know that God is always with us, even when alone, this line reminds us of the strength in numbers we find through our prayers and our support of each other. The church is more than just a big business in a big building, it is a place where two or three can gather in Christ's name and work to live as Christian disciples.

We find this passage of scripture between the parable of the lost sheep, where Jesus tells us to go to great lengths to bring those lost, back into the fold again, and the parable of the Unforgiving Debtor, which emphasizes the need for unrestrained forgiveness.

As you know I was working at Lake Street UMC in Eau Claire for 4 years with Pastor Graham West. We would conference on Monday mornings about how things went on Sundays and other issues. After a few months he told me that I frustrated him by always taking the other side of an issue, if he asked me about something.

I assured him that I work hard at that; trying to perceive how others might see the same truth, seeing an issue from all sides. I may not agree with all sides, but I work at identifying what is the perceived truth of others through open communication.

Peacekeeping often means knowing that you don't always have the only answer. Peacemaking means taking the higher road; admitting that you, too, may be part to blame, and all involve needing to ask for forgiveness and reconciliation.

So I ask you: Do you have a relationship that has been festering? Can you use Christ's steps toward reconciliation? We cannot be whole if parts of our lives are broken. The church cannot be whole if we aren't willing to value everyone, as God does.

Fred Kaan, a hymn writer sought to address issues of peace and justice. He was born in the Netherlands, July 1029. Though he was baptized, his parents did not attend church regularly.

He lived through the Nazi occupation, saw three of his grandparents die of starvation, and witnessed his parent's deep involvement in the resistance movement. They took in a number of refugees. He became a pacifist and began attending church in his teens.

Having become interested in British Congregationalism, through a friend he attended Western College in Bristol, and was ordained in the Windsor Road Congregational Church and served as a pastor, where he began to write hymns. In 1974 he wrote the hymn we will sing next: "Help Us Accept Each Other."

My favorite line is in the second stanza: "Teach us to care for people, for all, not just for some, to love them as we find them, or all they may become" You see, God is not finished with any of us yet. As we come to the communion table today, we should remember Jesus, the teacher, who taught us by saying "Love One Another, as I have loved you..."

PRAY