

God In Community (part 1 of 3 in *No One Is An Island* series)

Matthew 18:15-20; Genesis 2:18-25

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This week I went to a training to learn a new tool for counseling couples at all stages of relationship, but primarily engaged couples preparing for marriage. It was incredibly helpful, giving me language for things I knew but could not articulate, and tools and exercises for skills that I wasn't quite sure how to teach. Part of the program is an extensive relationship assessment tool, wherein the couple answers questions or evaluates statements about different aspects of their lives and their relationship to help the pastor know which areas to focus on and which skills need development. And during the training we were able to see real-life examples of these assessments and reports as well as video of real couples being counseled on these issues.

It wasn't surprising to learn, as we looked at these real-life examples of couples in counseling, that the majority need the most work in two primary areas: communication and conflict resolution. Now this makes sense for a multitude of reasons – one is that with those two skills, communication and conflict resolution, just about everything else can be resolved. Differences in ideas about discipline in parenting? You're going to need communication and conflict resolution. Different theories of financial management? Communication and conflict resolution. One of you wants to live downtown and the other in the suburbs? Communication and conflict resolution. And the more we watched these couples learn these very important skills and move forward in their relationships, the more it dawned on me that while this particular curriculum was about couples, about two individuals, these issues and their related skills are really about all relationships and how we live together in the world.

In fact, what Jesus is telling the early church in our gospel lesson today is precisely the same thing, though without a fancy online relationship assessment tool: he's teaching them tools for communication and conflict resolution. Here in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has been traveling with his disciples. He's taught in parables, he's fed the multitudes, and he's told the story about leaving 99 sheep to find the 1 who is lost. And then he gives this very detailed lesson on living in community.

Notice that Jesus doesn't begin by saying, "Sin shouldn't ever happen in Christian community, because all of you are perfect and will behave perfectly." Jesus is not so delusional. He assumes that we, the community of Christ but also a community of human beings, will sin. We will make mistakes. We will hurt one another. We will disagree. And he gives us tools to deal with that. If your brother or sister sins against you (or many manuscripts leave "against you" out and just say, "If someone sins"), go talk to him or her about it. Don't avoid that person, don't stuff the problem down and hope it will just go away, don't pretend nothing happened. Go to that person one-on-one and say, "Hey, can we talk about that thing? It upset me." And Jesus' focus here isn't on the offended one being justified, not on demanding an apology and asserting one's own right-ness, but on preserving the dignity of both people. The offended person doesn't tell someone *else* what happened, doesn't go around to all of his or her friends and say, "Can you believe what that person did?" The conversation happens one on one, respecting the belovedness of both people *so that they can be reconciled*.

And Jesus says, if that doesn't work, if the person won't listen, then take two others – not to gang up on him, but to get more clarity, more perspective. Maybe it was you who was mistaken in the first place, or maybe these others can help persuade your brother or sister to be reconciled with

you. And if that doesn't work, either, then it's something you can bring before the church. And if your brother or sister still won't be persuaded to reconciliation, then you treat him or her like a tax collector or a Gentile – which some have taken to mean throwing them out and thinking nothing further of them. But think about how Jesus refers to tax collectors and Gentiles in the gospels – they're the people he spends the most time with. To treat a brother like a tax collector simply means you acknowledge that his behavior may be so far outside the life of discipleship that he needs to be converted all over again. He will need even more attention over a longer period of time from the church's best evangelists and teachers and leaders; it may be an issue bigger than that conflict with you.

You can imagine this happening in real life: you come out of church and there's a huge scratch on your new car. Or you were planning a party and someone else planned something right over the same time period and invited the same people. Or your best friend used language that totally offended you in front of your children. Jesus says, "We will hurt one another. And this is how we deal with it."

And the question that remains is, "**Why bother?**" This is a *lot* of work, and we don't see the rest of the world engaging in this kind of activity. We might look silly to everyone else, reconciliation might take more energy than others are willing to give, and we might be humbled in the process. Because people in our world move to avoid confrontation with the neighbor who's annoying them. People in our world change jobs because they can't get along with their bosses or co-workers. People in our world go to business school because they cannot bear to tell their CEO fathers that their real passion is in theater. People in our world do not *talk* to each other in this way. People in our world write each other off over the pettiest of offenses. So maybe Jesus is just out of touch with our world. Why should we bother with this intense process of reconciliation?

Because we're Christians. And to Christians, community matters. Church matters. Reconciliation with your brothers and sisters in Christ matters. We are called to live in a different way than how the rest of the world lives, because our community is not just a country club or the homeowners association or the young alumni or the PTA. Our community isn't built around common lifestyle or similar interests or socioeconomic class or race or gender or family structure. Our community is the body of Christ, and when we gather together, God has promised to be here. Church is not governed by power or majority or status quo, but by the presence and voice and movement of the living God. Church is the kind of place where thousands can be fed with a few loaves and fishes, where the last are first and the first last, where 99 good hard-working folks can be left behind to search out 1 who is lost. *That's* why we bother to work so hard at being community, because we are the body of Christ.

The text we heard this morning from Genesis has been used and abused in recent years to assert that marriage should only be between a man and a woman. So it carries a lot of baggage, and I almost left it out for today. But if we look at the real meat of the text, it's less about marriage than companionship: God created Adam from the dust of the earth, and there was no reason for Adam to need a companion. Adam had total protection from God, the garden was paradise, sin had not happened, there was no shame. But the God we serve is not a solitary God – it's God in three persons, blessed Trinity – it's God in community. And to be created in God's image, as Adam was and every one of us is, is to be created *for* community, for companionship. God was not alone even in Godself, and so God knew that Adam shouldn't be alone, either. So God made a companion for Adam, out of his own flesh, that they might belong to each other. They started as one, so they're

only whole when they're one again, when they're bonded together, when they're reconciled. They're not fused together, they remain individuals, but they are one body, and that is why there is no shame, though they are totally vulnerable.

And the same is true for us: we were created to be in community, like God, to be in community where God resides, to be bonded to one another, not fused together, surrendering our individualism, but doing whatever it takes to restore ourselves to the oneness in which we began at the creation of the earth. For us, community matters. It's what we were created for, and it's where God resides. Because Jesus has said not only that we were made for each other, but that when we gather together, he will be present among us. And that's why we spend so much energy, so much time, risk so much of our own ego to be reconciled to one another. Because we are the body of Christ. It's not just a group we belong to: *it's who we are*.

There's a short commentary that's been very popular on the internet for the last few weeks, written by a UCC pastor whom I respect a great deal. In it, the pastor comments on all the times she's sat down on an airplane for that dreaded conversation in which the seatmate finds out she is a pastor, then proceeds to tell her how he/she is "spiritual but not religious." The person inevitably goes on to say that he/she experiences God in the sunsets and in the gardens and on mountain hikes and whatnot, as if this is some sort of daring spiritual insight that no one has heard before, as if we church people never leave the church building and need the "spiritual but not religious" folk to inform us that God is in nature (because we haven't read that in our Scriptures or noticed it ourselves). And the pastor says, in the article,

"Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. **Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.**"¹

To be "spiritual but not religious" is a typical American thing, because Americans are generally focused on individualism and self-reliance: these are American ideals. To be "spiritual but not religious," then, is simply to be self-centered, finding the tradition dull but yourself endlessly fascinating. And the truth is that being so fascinated with oneself is the easy thing, and also the less satisfying: it takes courage to dive into a community that will require so much work, to be shaped by the great cloud of witnesses that has gone before, to bind yourself to another person until you are one and are no longer ashamed even when fully exposed; but it is there that you meet the fullness of God and are truly the person you were created to be. It takes courage to be the church, but this is who we are called to be: together, in community, reconciling ourselves to one another at all costs, because God is here among us. We are the body of Christ. Amen.

¹ <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/daily-devotional/spiritual-but-not-religious.html>. Emphasis mine.