September 7, 2014

Matthew 18:15-20

Love is a choice

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Matthew 18:15-20 (New Revised Standard Version)

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

This is a time of celebrating love at Greenland Hills. Today we celebrate and welcome home the new Quicksall family of 6. Rebekah and Eliza, your parents Amanda and Andrew, have been telling us all about you both for years and we have been praying for you each and every day and we are so excited that you are both here! You are home. Welcome to this home of Greenland Hills.

We are talking about love here at Greenland Hills as we study the Five Love Languages which is a book written by Gary Chapman. Over the next few weeks we will be talking about the different love languages: words of affirmation, receiving gifts, acts of service, physical touch, and quality time. But before we talk about love, we have to talk about conflict. We have to talk about what we do in a conflict. We have to talk about the choice that we make each and every moment of the day when we choose to love.

We are a people saved by grace who are called to love. Our life is a gift to God and we are called to love one another, to respect all people, to share with those in need. I learned conflict at a very young age. When I was 6 years old I didn’t want to go to ballet practice.  It was time to go and I was all dressed and my mom was ready, but I had decided that I did not want to go.  I have this image of my mom across the living room telling me that we were going, and I looked at her and I yelled, “I don’t want to go.  Then I said this word and I have never ever since said it to my mother.  Have you ever been in conflict with your parents or your siblings or your family?

My husband, Lee, and I were early in our marriage and one night we were fighting and he looked at me and asked me if I was just trying to pick a fight with him.  How did he know?  I was picking fights and creating conflict when life got stressful.  Since then I have tried really hard, not always successfully, to not pick fights with my spouse.  Happy couples do fight, what sets loving couples apart is that they disagree in loving ways.  They accept that conflict is normal, they fight fairly, they stick to the issues, they don’t hit below the belt, and they don’t drag other people into it. Have you ever been in conflict with your partner? Or a friend? Or a co-worker?

When I went to church when I was younger it seemed like paradise.  There was no screaming, there was only love and acceptance.  It felt like an oasis of hugs!  It is still an oasis of hugs, but I know now that like anywhere else in this world, there is conflict in this place.  Have you ever witnessed or been a part of conflict in the church?  In my mind, this community is the best thing that is going on and I want to be a part of this hospital for sinners.  I want to be in this place where there are all kinds of people and the greatest thing that we have in common is our love for God and our love for our neighbors.  We praise God together and we serve God together.

But conflict is inevitable.  We should expect conflict in our lives because conflict is human. I have a church joke about conflict, a pastor was asked about his Church membership. "We have 800 members," he said. "How many active members?" the questioner asked. "All of them," the pastor replied. "1/2 are working with me and 1/2 are working against me."  Conflict is built into our DNA.  It is inherent in human existence.

But it is how we respond that is the most important. Two men who lived in a small village got into a terrible dispute that they could not resolve. So they decided to talk to the town sage. The 1st man went to the sage's home and told his version of what happened. When he finished, the sage said, "You're absolutely right." The next night, the 2nd man called on the sage and told his side of the story. The sage responded, "You're absolutely right." Afterward, the sage's wife scolded her husband. "Those men told you 2 different stories and you told them they were absolutely right. That's impossible, they can't both be absolutely right." The sage turned to his wife and said, "You're absolutely right." Some folks don’t want to deal with conflict.

In the Bible we find that conflict is a part of being human.  First we have conflict with Adam and Eve testing God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.  Then, we have the worst consequence of conflict with Cain and Abel.  One was a sheepherder, one was a farmer.  A great tragedy occurred and yet God still stayed in relationship with the murderer.  The mark that Cain receives from God is a mark of protection.

God does not prevent Cain from killing.  Nor did God prevent Joseph’s brothers from selling him into slavery.  Or Jesus from being crucified.  God does not stop conflict with our parents, or our siblings, or our loved ones, or our co-workers, or in our churches.  God’s work in the story is to call us to choose good, and to renew the blessing that has been broken.  In the end, Cain survives, as do Joseph, his brothers, and Jesus.  God does not give up on anyone.  Even in the midst of evil, even in the midst of conflict, God is working to bring about good, and in the midst of despair, God brings hope, in the midst of death, God brings life.  Wherever the intersection of evil and good are, that is the cross.  Wherever the intersection of conflict, forgiveness, and reconciliation are, that is the cross.

The good news is that conflict does not put you beyond God’s care.  God’s care is still there and the good news is that there is a process for resolution.  We do not have to dissolve a relationship whenever there is conflict.  We do not have to join another church whenever there is conflict.  Wherever you go to hide, wherever you go to run, conflict will find you.

And we are going to mess up, whether out of insecurity, bad training, or habit, we all too often put our wants, needs, and desires ahead of those of others. And so we hurt the people around us. And they hurt us. Which means that forgiveness is perhaps the essential ingredient in our relationships at home, work, school, church, and all the rest.

The scripture that we read together seems clear enough. When you have been harmed, step one, take the offender aside and show him/her the error of his/her ways. Step two, bring a group to confront said offender. Step three, shun and/or banish unrepentant offender. Repeat as necessary. But those directions have be read in light of the larger context of forgiveness and relationship. The primary goal is not to change someone’s behavior, or demonstrate how they are wrong, or even to invite them to repentance. The goal is to restore a damaged relationship by speaking truthfully about the breach or hurt you are experiencing, taking responsibility for your feelings and your actions and inviting the other person to do the same, and inviting dialogue and conversation that you might find a way forward together.[[1]](#footnote-2)

The world we live in today is so digital. We can complain about someone else at the safe distance of commenting on a facebook post, we share difficult news by email rather than through face-to-face conversation. We hide in this digital forest and we fail to take seriously the humanity of the person with whom we are in relationship.

Jesus invites us to love each other enough to speak not just *to* but *with* each other, to hold each other accountable through vulnerability rather than by force. It takes guts to talk to someone you feel is in the wrong without judging them, without putting them down, without them taking responsibility for their actions. And it takes guts to listen when someone else tries to do the same thing for you. When we put being in relationship above being right, then we take seriously how much God wants us all to be in good relationship with each other and with God.

When we nurture the kind of caring, vulnerable, honest, and authentic community Jesus is talking about, God’s will and presence become manifest as Christians gather together in faith, hope, forgiveness, and love.

May we put relationship above being right and practice giving and receiving forgiveness. I invite us to imagine a troubled relationship in our lives. Now imagine extending forgiveness to that person. And imagine asking forgiveness for yourself. Could you write that person a letter where you offer forgiveness?

You see, God really cares about how we treat each other and are treated in turn. God wants us to better love each other. And God wants to embody the forgiveness that Jesus showed on the cross. We may be human here at Greenland Hills and we may experience conflict every single day but we know that right here today there are 2 new children among us that we celebrate and we welcome. Love brought them home and as Jesus tells us, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Love is a choice and here at Greenland Hills, we choose to love.

1. http://www.davidlose.net/2014/09/pentecost-14-a-forgiveness-community/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)