

Matthew 18:15-17

“Optimal Church Communication: Direct is Best”

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Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA
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Introductory Piece:

Children and adults, please give attention to the Bible reading. It is Jesus’ teaching about how to respond when someone has wronged you.

The Reading:

“If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you’ve made a friend. If he won’t listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. If he still won’t listen, tell the church. If he won’t listen to the church, you’ll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God’s forgiving love.

I heard of a church that learned of their pastor’s resignation in a strange and sudden fashion. One Sunday, just before services were to begin, the minister simply posted on the front door of the church building a handwritten note, saying, “I quit!” and then drove off! You can probably imagine the emotional baggage that this congregation was left with!

It will not be news to anyone here that human beings hurt one another and don’t always communicate well! From micro-aggressions to murder, inadvertently and intentionally, people inflict harm, even within the Church. Matthew 18:15 starts by acknowledging that we “sin against” each other, and it’s not “if” but “when.”

In the next verses, Jesus offers a way for us to respond to these incidents. **Among the three paths of communication that we normally take, Jesus charts the best way.**

One path we often take when another has hurt us is to keep quiet and avoid the wrongdoer.

I can certainly see why this is a common response! You don’t have to be a #9 on the Enneagram personality scale – “the Peacemaker” – to swallow your feelings and let the hurt pressure your heart. In fact, many, if not most of us, and entire congregations, are conflict avoidant. Granted, there are situations in which you ought to be careful about confrontation. It may take some time and strategy, some prayer and counseling, to communicate with one who has mistreated you! **But avoidance isn’t a long-term solution or what Jesus prescribes.**

A second path we often take is to tell someone else how much we have been wronged.

I can see how speaking with someone else – a pastor or an un-related counselor might be called for. When we’ve been sinned against, we probably need a sounding board to be able to put the pieces together and deal with the impact of what has occurred. Praying to God and journaling can also be like telling someone else and serve this purpose.

But using a third party to convey a message to the wrongdoer, or telling others in the church about the incident in order to gain allies or to tarnish the reputation of the one who has

hurt you is an *indirect* form of communication. Psychology calls this behavior “triangulating.” Instead of going in a straight line to the perpetrator, it creates a triangle.

Over the course of the Pandemic, Steve and I have watched a number of older television series. One we really liked was “Last Tango in Halifax.” In it, an older couple marries and creates a blended family. When misunderstandings and conflicts arise between the couple, each of them tend to ‘triangle.’ They tell their respective adult child all about it, who then forms an opinion, gets involved, and makes it worse. This blurring of boundaries is very entertaining in a show but unhealthy in real life!

Triangulation causes *more* harm than good. In the case of churches, it can lead members to take sides, erodes trust, and doesn’t solve the original issue! Jesus wants us to avoid this mess.

He *does* outline additional steps if necessary: step two intentionally engages two or three others, and step three brings it before the church in order to bring about healing, reconciliation, and change. These two steps can also be used in creating policies that will prevent harm in the future. You’ve maybe heard of a Safe-Church policy that protects children from would-be sexual predators. **But Jesus does *not* recommend bringing in other parties as the *first* step.**

I’m going to change Robert Frost’s poem slightly: “*three* roads diverged in the woods, and I, I took the one less traveled by.”

Jesus prescribes here the road less traveled – the path of direct communication with the one who has offended you. As the Message Bible translates verse 15, “If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell them—work it out between the two of you.”

I once interviewed a member of a congregation who told me how she and her friend there fell out. Apparently, Olive spoke up in a meeting in a way that unintentionally offended the other woman. Olive immediately went to her to smooth things out, but the other turned away. She felt insulted and didn’t speak to Olive for months. For her part, Olive made overtures; she also fasted and prayed. Then one Sunday during the Passing of the Peace, her friend came to her with open arms. In the interview, Olive summarized: “Who did that? *God* did that, Jean!”

Jesus certainly knows that reconciliation is not easy and not always possible! **But God can do wonders, and the direct route is best.**

I benefited from a wise moderator in a former pastorate who followed Jesus’ prescription. In hindsight, the trouble happened because I had become frustrated with my workload at that congregation and the way the members took very little initiative in planning, and kept this inside. So at the end of one committee meeting, I said something sharp, like: “Who’s going to do this? Me?!” The next day, John Koonce, the moderator, happened to drop by the church and kindly asked me what was going on. We had a longer talk, and it opened the way to constructive changes.

You see, John took the direct path to communication, the road less traveled that Jesus walked, and as Myles Horton reminds us: “We make the road by walking.”¹

¹Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).