

10/31/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Thank you, Bev! And welcome – Welcome to everyone, here, in-person or at home watching on your computer... we're glad you've joined us for this worship service this morning as we continue our series on Anabaptist Essentials. We do extend a special welcome to Beverly and to Dale; it's so good to have you both here and to be blessed by your music, Bev. Our oldest daughter was privileged to have Bev as one of her music profs at Goshen College, so we've appreciated Bev for many years already! And I invite you to come now and bring us greetings from the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, IN!

Please join in the **Call to Worship** and confession, as it's printed in your bulletin:

Leader: The Lord says: Act justly and do what is righteous, because my salvation is coming soon!

People: Happy is the one who does this, the person who holds it fast, who avoids doing any evil.

Leader: Don't let the immigrant who has joined with the Lord say, "The Lord will exclude me from the people." The Lord says: "The immigrants who have joined me, serving me and loving my name:

People: I will bring them to my holy mountain, and bring them joy in my house of prayer.

Leader: I will accept their entirely burned offerings and sacrifices on my alter."

All: My house will be known as a house of prayer for all peoples,

Leader: says the Lord God, who gathers Israel's outcasts. I will gather still others to those I have already gathered. Let's pray.

INVOCATION – Lord God, meet us in this place, in this time of worship. Make yourself known and clearly understood to us as we study your word and seek your will. Amen.

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

God, we come to you in prayer this morning, thankful for your goodness. We see it all around us, in the beauty of the autumn fields, the smiles of loved ones, in the remarkable ways our bodies have been created with each part functioning in its essential role. And we acknowledge, God that you are the creator of each of us and the creator of the universe, and all that you have created is good.

As we focus this morning on reconciliation with one another, we are also keenly aware of the need for reconciliation between humanity and creation. O God, may there be wisdom, willingness to change, a deep desire to care for the earth and all who dwell on it.

We pray for your children all around this world – for those who live in situations of tumult and fear. We pray for the people of Sudan as they, again, face life-threatening conflict. May your Spirit of calm prevail. Be a comfort to those who are powerless in the face of those who misuse power. We pray for people who have been uprooted and misplaced from their homes because of things beyond their control – war, famine, draught, disasters. May they find welcome and hospitality, the gifts that you want for all your people, God.

We continue to pray for those who live in long-term care facilities – many of whom are some of the most vulnerable to the corona virus and other viruses. We pray for the administrators and staff, those who keep working under difficult conditions to try to keep their charges safe. We know, God that many of our elders are suffering from this extended period of severe caution. They miss their families, they miss seeing friends, they miss getting out and coming to church. Give them comfort, Lord. Hold them in your love and care. Grant the staff and all who care for them perseverance, patience, the ability to keep on with their vigil and their hard work. Be with each of our Alexanderwohl family who reside in a nursing home. We pray especially today for Judy Unruh as she was taken this week to Bethesda for further therapy and recovery from her hip replacement. Continue to be with her as she heals. Be with Darrell as he looks after her.

We pray for Braxton and his family as they anticipate his next round of surgeries coming up in Boston. Grant them a sense of calm as they make preparations to travel. Be with his doctors. We pray that their expertise will be used for Braxton's well-being.

God, we pray for Bea and Brody in this week before their wedding. Give them a deep sense of joy as they enter into this covenant with one another. Thank you for their love for and commitment to each other and you.

Bless us now as we worship, pray, listen and learn. Speak to our spirits with your Holy Spirit. Teach us grace and mercy. In the name of your Son Jesus who showed us grace and mercy. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION – PASTOR LOIS

Giver of all good gifts, bless this money that has been given through the church, for the ministries to which you've called us. Bless each one who gives money, time, energy, talents – bless each one who lives for your glory. Amen.

SERMON – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Matt 5:23-24, 18:15-20

INTRO

We like to talk a lot about reconciliation, but few things are harder than putting reconciliation with others into practice if we have been hurt or may have caused hurt.

When I was in seminary, I participated in a January class that took me to the Semilla Seminary in Guatemala City.

The rector of the seminary, Wili Hugo Perez told a story of attending a very lively church service. People were filled with joy as they worshipped God.

By his description and my own experience of similar churches in Honduras, I imagine a very charismatic service, perhaps with speaking in tongues and dancing in the Spirit.

Following the service, Wili Hugo was walking back with a few others to the place where he was staying. A woman who worshipped God passionately mere minutes earlier said, "we can't go down that street." It turned out she had a conflict with another woman who lived there and

they weren't speaking to each other. She wanted to avoid the awkwardness of seeing each other.

As Wili Hugo told the story, he commented on the contradiction of worshipping passionately, yet not being on speaking terms with another person.

We could all surely sympathize with the woman. I have no idea what her story is, or what the hurt she carried was. We can understand why she may have not been emotionally at the place of going down that street.

MATT 5

Yet Matthew 5:23-24 seems to agree with Wili Hugo. In these verses, Jesus' teaching supposes that a devout Jew has brought a sacrifice to the temple, when they realize they have a broken relationship ("your brother has something against you").

Jesus makes the shocking statement that the ritual sacrifice needs to be interrupted at that point and the relationship mended.

"First go be reconciled with your brother [or sister]." Jesus isn't teaching that relationship with people are *more* important than a relationship with God, but that our relationship with God can't be separated from our relationships with people.

The ritual of sacrifice (and later Christians would apply this to the practice of communion) doesn't have integrity unless our role in our relationships has integrity.

A couple of weeks ago, I said that part of our call as a church in Anabaptist theology is to be a sign of the kingdom of God.

Bringing the kingdom of God to earth is not our job. That's beyond our capability. Remember that most of the time Jesus taught about God's reign through metaphorical and symbolic comparisons in his earthy stories that we call parables.

Precisely our job as a church is to imagine our life together is a real-life parable of what God's kingdom is like. If we actually succeed in doing that (or if we don't even try) either speaks volumes to a watching world.

MATTHEW 18

Turning to Matthew 18, we have an issue between members of the church. The actual wording is: "if your brother sins against you," but "brother" (or "sister") is a kind of code language for fellow follower of Jesus.

At the outset, in Matthew 18:5, we have disagreement among ancient manuscripts about two words: many manuscripts include the words "against you" – if your brother sins "against you." Some ancient manuscripts just have "if your brother sins." The 2011 update to the NIV translation leaves "against you" out, while other translations leave it in.

This can make a significant difference in how we read the remainder of the passage. Is Jesus' teaching about how to practice accountability and discipline in the church? Is any member

empowered to confront another about a perceived error? Or is this about personal hurt or conflict – approaching another if they have hurt you?

The passage just prior is about the lost sheep – the member that has strayed, while the passage following is about forgiveness. The disciple Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive another who “sins against me.”

One argument for reading this as “sinning against you” is the fact that we are told to go to talk to the other person alone, which seems more natural if I have personally been affected than if this is just me perceiving someone’s sin.

It’s true that these two words “against you,” make a difference whether you understand this passage as focused on church discipline – confronting sin or wrongdoing in general – or focused on resolution of conflict.

Yet conflict resolution and integrity of the community are clearly related. A severe conflict between members affects the whole community. Nor is our behavior a private affair – even if we think we are not hurting anyone, unhealthy behavior impacts the community as a whole.

Maybe it is best to say that this is about both church discipline *and* resolution of conflicts.

This passage envisions sin in the sense of personally harming another person, and restoration is the antidote.

In our highly individualistic culture, focused on personal autonomy, and personal search for “fulfillment,” we have lost a sense of community that was there for the early Christian communities, as well as the early Anabaptists.

THE RULE OF CHRIST

This passage has been traditionally called the “rule of Christ” because of the guidance that follows.

You start with the person who has hurt you. You go direct rather than discharging your feelings on a third party. In many cases, talking directly allows for resolution without having to affect any others in the community.

A direct, private conversation avoids humiliating the other person – highly important in Jesus’ day. Jesus says that if the person listens, “you have won or gained your brother” – the same word for earning a reward.

If we take this as a principle rather than a hard-and-fast rule, it allows for variation in cultures where it is normal to use a go-between. Another significant exception is if there is a power differential, and the hurt person will only put themselves in a position of further vulnerability by going directly.

But this first step should give us some give us some pause. How often do we practice that? It is much more common to only complain to those I feel comfortable and aligned with. It is a fine line sometimes between speaking with others to gain perspective and find needed emotional support versus gossip and damaging another’s trust in the community.

The second step follows if the first conversation doesn't change anything. Then you are to take one or two others. This step seems to have its roots in ancient Israelite law of requiring testimony of "two or three witnesses" in order for a judge to execute a sentence. Especially at this step, we are probably envisioning a serious, rather than minor offense that has ripple effects in the community.

The final step is to take the matter to the church. Here there is no mention of whether church leadership has a special role or decides on behalf of the church, or whether the decision is to be by consensus of every congregational member. If the offending member still persists in not listening, then they are "to be for you as a Gentile or tax collector."

Apparently, this means excommunication, which is how this passage has been historically understood by Anabaptists. Of course, excommunication is much more humane than imprisonment or execution, which is how the medieval church functioned.

Yet these words seem out of place. Didn't Jesus talk about searching after the one lost sheep and rejoicing when that sheep was found? Doesn't Jesus tell Peter to forgive up to seventy-seven times? Didn't Jesus hang out with "tax collectors and sinners?"

There may be a kind of paradox here. While the Jewish temple had a wall set up that Gentiles were not allowed to pass, Jesus' ministry constantly broke down walls.

Yet the community gathered in Jesus' name had to have clarity on who were fully committed and who were not. Perhaps what this passage envisions is releasing a person who effectively become an outsider by their choices. Maybe there is separation necessary for the church to remain focused on its mission, but this is never without the hope of restoration, just as Jesus believed in restoration across the boundaries of his day.

MATT 18:18-20

In the verses 18-20, Jesus' teaching is even more challenging from our perspective. Jesus says "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven" and "whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Jesus goes on to say if two or three in the church agree on a matter, that's how it will be for God in heaven. These words give the church the authority to represent Christ in matters of our life together.

A parallel in the Jewish tradition is story in the Talmud of a debate on whether a particular kind of oven is "unclean." Rabbi Eliezer manages to summon a number of miracles, including a divine voice to prove that God agrees with him. However, the other Rabbis vote against Rabbi Eliezer and excommunicate him.

They interpret the Deuteronomy 30:12 ("It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?") to mean that in minor matters, the best interpretation of the Law by the majority is the will of God.

Later it is evident that God has to agree with the majority of the Rabbis. God says smiling, “My children have triumphed over me!”¹

My point is that in this passage Jesus is delegating huge authority to the discernment of the church. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst.” This means that when two or three gather in Jesus’ name to work out God’s will in a situation, Jesus is present.

I don’t know about you, but I’m afraid to claim that much authority. And these verses don’t provide great guidance when we have multiple factions of at least two or three with different discernment.

But I also understand the dangers of avoiding the hard work of discerning God’s will together. We create a way of doing church that is highly individualistic and superficial. We reduce church to a group cheering each other on to each find our individual paths, whatever they may be, with no authority to actually speak into one another’s lives – to give and receive counsel.

In *Anabaptist Essentials*, Palmer Becker outlines the steps toward reconciliation from the conflict resolution work of Ron Kraybill. The stages and steps include the original offence, denial that there is a problem, loving confrontation of the person in denial, confession or taking responsibility for hurt or rift in relationship, forgiveness, and action to set things right again.

Whatever form the steps may take in an individual case, it’s important to remember that reconciliation and forgiveness are *not* the same thing. Reconciliation doesn’t depend on just one individual, while forgiveness is a necessary healing journey for any of us even if the other will never acknowledge a wrong.

In short, reconciliation takes at least two or more people and is not up to just one.

POLITICAL DIFFERENCES

I’ve pondered how the increased polarization in our culture is further stressing relationships: how our political, cultural, or sometimes-theological divides cut across families.

When we were at my parent’s this past summer, one of my uncles drove up in his motorcycle the same date the house next to my parent’s was being demolished. He reminisced about the two different cisterns this old house had, and the reasons for each.

He also shared about the corncrib also slated to be demolished. My uncle was in junior high and two other uncles in High School when it was built. My older uncles had to be up on the rafters, which made everyone nervous. I could tell these two demolitions brought some feelings of loss.

This is also the same uncle who graciously got the beautiful cherry grandmother clock working that I inherited from my grandfather before we moved to Kansas.

¹ Bava Metziah 59; See <https://torahinmotion.org/discussions-and-blogs/bava-metziah-59-torah-is-not-in-heaven> or https://www.sefaria.org/Bava_Metziah.59b.1?lang=bi (paragraph before 59b)

My uncle and aunt are at a different place in their understanding of COVID than most of the rest of the extended family, and also have begun feeling more estranged from the church where I grew up.

My uncle and I didn't talk about any of this. Growing up I knew next to nothing about anyone's views and all I knew was there was a sense of connection and shared memory as a family. Now I'm aware of these differences, and while there is not open conflict that I'm aware of, there is a sense of tension and awkwardness.

I don't think that I'm the only one that's noticed that the growing political and cultural polarization in our country affects churches, families, and individual relationships. We are more aware of these divides than ever. The disagreement extends to basic facts and sometimes even to deep-set values. It's hard to know how to even start conversation.

People at one end of the political spectrum tend to judge those on the other as morally inferior. Ask yourself: what attitude do you hold toward people that are at a different place in their beliefs? What does it mean to see that of God in people with whom you disagree?

In a time when many people's primary identity is their politics, it is crucial that we regain a conviction about the core message of the Gospel as a way to find a deeper common ground across our differences.

Whether or not Matthew 18 directly applies to your situation, we can take from the first principle in Matthew 18 that we need to talk to one another. It seems like this has become very difficult for us to do in our day. We would rather avoid difficult conversation. We would rather not get too close to many other people, because there's more risk of getting hurt when you do.

While we don't like fights, fighting is actually a way to stay connected. Maybe we shouldn't assume that lack of fighting is always a good thing. The alternative way we commonly respond to conflict is to simply distance. While we can't maintain close relationships with everyone, this distancing impacts the life of the community.

Even the idea of accountability in the church is harder when we have a consumer mentality that we are like customers subscribing to a particular church "service," able to switch to another or simply pull out if we don't like something.

Certainly, if we look further back in our history, we have many examples of hurtful church discipline, whether it was following the rule of Matthew 18 or not. I don't have the answers, but here are a few thoughts:

First, let's recover Matthew 18, but as a set of principles rather than rigid rules. Seeking love as our motivation for every step is the most important rule. Attending to power dynamics as well as sensitivity to the feelings of others are also important.

Second, let's set up the groundwork for harder conversations by seeking accountability for ourselves before holding others accountable. Ask how yourself how you want to be challenged in your faith and held accountable. Decide who might be trusted people who could do that for you, perhaps in your Sunday School class or your friendships. We also lay groundwork when we

simply work to build deeper relationships and trust with one another in general before any rift or conflict emerges.

Finally, when conflict or hurt does emerge, let's do our best to not leave the elephant in the room unnamed. Allow differences of perception to exist without judging how another sees things. Find your own voice to say, "this is how I see things, this is what I experienced, this is how I felt hurt."

We will have to work through our own emotions when hurt, and confronting another will go much better when we don't go at it from our strong emotions. If you are the person that has somehow caused hurt, you will likewise have to work through denial, shame, and likely your own hurt.

Life is complicated. Sometimes we legitimately view a situation differently. It takes a great amount of hospitality to validate the experience the other person claims to have had when you disagree. Sometimes hurt occurs both ways, or in multiple direction.

Our default is to distance or engage in emotional cut-off when something has happened that challenges the relationship. The higher calling, when possible, is to stay in relationship. Reconciliation is never a forgone conclusion, but if we don't do this hard work, then our money is not where our mouths are.

Our actions speak louder than our words. No matter what our words or how compelling of a worship service we have, we demonstrate whether we actually believe the Gospel by whether we believe in pursuing reconciliation with one another. When we make this hard work our goal, we become a sign of God's reign.

QUESTIONS

1. How practical is the guidance of Matthew 18? How can we apply its principles?
2. When have you seen reconciliation take place?
3. What factors make dealing with conflict difficult?

BENEDICTION (VT 1055)

Go knowing you are beloved by God,

God, praising God for the good news in Jesus Christ.

Go, living the message of God's grace, peace, and love. Amen.