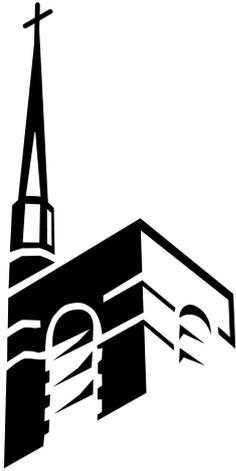


January 26, 2014



***The Golden Rules:***  
**“LOVING DIFFERENCES”**

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First United Methodist Church  
Birmingham, Michigan  
Scripture: Matthew 18:15-20

Prayer Song

*Lord, listen to your children praying; Lord, send your spirit in this place;  
Lord, listen to your children praying; send us love, send us power, send us grace.*

“Mary Jane, I need to talk with you. Sally and I got into an argument during our Bible study last week. It was about immigration.”

“What happened, Sharon?”

“Sally has a friend who is an undocumented immigrant and was arrested. She’s now in jail because her documents are not valid, and she’ll probably be deported. Sally was very upset because her friend has little children who are now in foster care.”

“What was the argument about?”

“I told Sally that I had no pity on her friend because she’s in our country illegally.”

“And?”

“She accused me of being cruel and heartless, and I felt that was unfair. It got ugly. We’re not talking with each other right now. I don’t want to ruin our friendship, but I’m gonna stand my ground.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“Well, I thought I thought I’d go tell Mike and Tom as well. They’re on my side.”

“Don’t you think it would be better to just call Sally up and ask her out for lunch? Just sit down and listen to each other’s perspective. Most of the time we can resolve differences if we choose to respect and keep loving each other.”

“Oh. That sounds logical. I guess it’s okay to agree to disagree. I think I’ll do that. Thanks, Mary Jane!”

Don't you just love differences? Differences are a part of the goodness of God's creation. Whether we like it or not, we live in an increasingly diverse world. Our earth becomes more of a melting pot with each passing year. Globalization, the Internet, and social networking are bringing us together in ways we never dreamed just fifteen years ago.

Along with the necessity of interacting with people of different races, cultures, religions, languages, and countries comes the inevitable challenge of honoring, accepting, and even loving differences. Our reality, however, is that the inability to understand and embrace differences as a gift from God can cause incredible heartache as well as bad behavior. God creates us as unique, one-of-a-kind individuals, gives us freedom, and puts us in community with each other. What a recipe for conflict, even in the church!

Some people seem to specialize in creating conflict. Of course, none of those folks are here at First Church. You all get along famously, don't you? Are any of you concerned about the escalating polarization and lack of civility in our country, especially in the political arena? How about in The United Methodist Church?

Over the past several months, the issue of gay marriage has created deep sadness and division in our denomination. Last fall several United Methodist pastors, including a retired bishop, performed gay marriages, which is prohibited by our United Methodist Book of Discipline.

The most high profile case was that of Frank Schaefer, a pastor in Pennsylvania, who was defrocked last month after officiating at the marriage of his son to another man six years ago. A complaint was filed shortly before the statute of limitations was reached, and a church trial was held. A jury of Rev. Schaefer's clergy peers deemed him guilty and then removed his credentials after Rev. Schaefer would not promise to stop performing gay marriages. The trial of another United Methodist retired clergy, who is a former dean of Yale Divinity School, will take place in March.

My hope is that the church can model healthy ways of dialoguing about its own difficult issues so that we can be an example for how our world can manage its complex differences. Unfortunately, the church doesn't always do so well in this area. According to a national survey of congregations several years ago called Faith Communities Today, the greatest predictor of local church decline is destructive conflict.

Conflict is a natural part of life. It's how we deal with conflict that's the problem. What if you and I could learn to love differences? What if we could view our enemy as someone to help us see ourselves in a new way? What if conflict became an opportunity for spiritual growth – to enlarge our hearts and contribute to peace and justice in our world? Matthew chapter 18, more than any other passage in the Bible, gives us practical wisdom for treating each other in healthy ways, maintaining church fellowship, and preserving the integrity of the community of faith.

Verses 15-20, which were read a few minutes ago, are commonly called "The Rule of Christ for the Church." The Rule of Christ is a simple linear model for resolving concerns, not only in the church but in all of our relationships. There are four steps in this process. Jesus says in verse 15, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone" (15a). Makes perfect sense, doesn't it? The person who has been harmed is the

moral agent for transformation. But who does that person usually speak to first? Why, Mike and Tom and everyone but the person who has hurt him or her.

Remember, Matthew is writing his gospel from the viewpoint of the needs of the early church. We're not sure what type of sins Matthew is referring to here, but they are clearly ones that threaten the unity of the body of Christ. In this verse, Jesus counsels church members to talk directly and privately to the person who has harmed them in order to avoid embarrassment and be sensitive to their feelings. That's how we best live together as family in the kingdom of God.

Jesus goes on to say, "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" (15b-16). The role of witnesses is not to take sides but to be a mediating presence and to assist in the listening process. This is a very important step in the Rule of Christ. In the case of our skit this morning, if Sharon and Sally were not able to work out their differences, maybe Mary Jane or her pastor or another mutually agreed upon person might be able to sit in on the conversation.

If meeting with a mediator doesn't work, either, and reconciliation is not achieved, there is a third step. Jesus says, "If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church" (17a). Evidently, the early Christian church had developed procedures for dealing with disputes, which might have involved an intervention of the group as a whole since the house churches were small. Today, if the issue was a major one, this step might include meeting with the Staff Parish Relations Committee, or the district superintendent, or the bringing in of a ministry consultant to facilitate reconciliation and healing in the congregation.

There's one more step to this process. Verse 17b says, "If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." This is the critical verse in the passage, and I would contend that how we interpret this verse depends on how we view God's work in the world. Most people see this verse as providing the earliest legal procedures for excommunication. Just as Gentiles and tax collectors were despised in their time, so we ought to turn our backs on those who sin until they repent.

Having grown up as a Mennonite, I am familiar with the Amish practice of shunning, where members who sin are excommunicated and avoided by active members in all social and business activities until they repent. Actually, the Amish split from the Swiss Mennonites in 1693 because they insisted on shunning, whereas the Mennonites considered shunning to be cruel and unusual punishment. However, I must say from personal experience that Mennonites could be pretty judgmental themselves, as we all can be at times.

Could it be that Jesus is thinking of something else here when he says, "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector?" Since Jesus, in other places, urges us to associate with tax collectors and spread the gospel to Gentiles, could Jesus be saying here that the person who has sinned should be the object of continuing love and missionary activity instead of shunning?

Does the interpretation of excommunication reflect traditional prejudice against Gentiles and tax collectors from the conservative Jewish Christian congregation to which Matthew is writing

instead of reflect the way of Jesus? Is this The Rule of Christ about judgment or grace? Is it about being more condemning or more holy and loving?

How we interpret this verse depends on how we view God's work in our world. And don't forget: this scripture is framed by two other stories – the lost sheep before and the unforgiving servant after, both of which emphasize that sinners are to be saved, not condemned. Listen to how Eugene Peterson paraphrases verse 17 in *The Message*: “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.”

Finally, the saying in verse 20 reminds the church that when alienated Christians or any people come together with or without a mediator to sort through issues and seek reconciliation, Christ is with us as we do this difficult work. The presence of the risen Christ is in each stage of the process. Our human failure to communicate well can be redeemed not because of us but because of Christ in us.

Do you still love differences? Reconciling conflict and embracing differences in our church, family, job, and country is hard work, isn't it? It's so challenging that many of us throw up our hands and are convinced it's impossible. It reminds me of something that Lewis Carroll wrote in *Alice in Wonderland*. “One can't believe impossible things,” Alice said. “I daresay you haven't had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” I invite you to consider believing just three impossible things before Sunday brunch today.

**Impossible Thing #1: It is possible to love differences by speaking the truth in love.**

Paul says in Ephesians 4:15, “Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” With humility, compassion, and respect for those with whom you disagree or who have harmed you, and knowing that God is there with you, will you dare to engage in direct, gentle, and holy conversation? And will you be open to where the wind of the Holy Spirit might take that conversation?

**Impossible Thing #2: It is possible to love differences by letting go of self.**

The Rule of Christ is not about conflict management. It's about conflict transformation. Conflict transformation is where God's work of love is done. It's where bad behaviors end, and new and healthy behaviors emerge. Conflict transformation recognizes that all people have been harmed and have harmed others. That includes you and me. This new way of being with others means letting go of our own misconceptions and desires and allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, fully present to God's grace, and open to change.

**Impossible Thing #3: It is possible to love differences by creating a well, not a wall.**

Do walls ever really help? The Berlin Wall, the walls in the West Bank between Israelis and Palestinians, the wall along the Arizona border to keep out undocumented immigrants? Walls try

to keep apart people who have differences, but can a wall ever address the real problem?  
“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” Robert Frost

How about creating a well instead? Just as people the world over have gathered around wells for centuries to collect fresh, flowing water, so the image of a well describes how we can bring others together. When we create wells and allow them to fill up with the abundant, life-giving, healing water of Jesus Christ, then everyone can be well together.

I suspect that some, if not many of you who are here today are experiencing conflict with another in your family, work place, school, or right here at church, whether you have harmed someone or been harmed yourself. Is God tugging at your heart right now? Is there someone you need to approach this week in order to speak the truth in love? If you know of others who are in conflict, might God be calling you to be a mediating presence?

Does God desire you to treat people as Gentiles and tax collectors by loving them rather than discarding them? Can you become the kind of integrated, open, approachable person that others feel free to come to with concerns? Are you connected with the One who promises to be there when two or three are gathered around the well to become well together?

“One can’t believe impossible things,” Alice said. “I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” Now’s your chance to practice the impossible.