

Matthew 18: 15-20
Creekside COB
September 4, 2005

The Test of Friendship

Bobby Pickens was my boyhood friend. An alley separated our backyards. The length of that alley between Patten and Mark Streets was the artery of our activity. It was the sight of walnut throwing contests and epic snowball battles. There was a big brick building called the “car barn” where we shot pigeons with slingshots. Bobby’s dad was a carpenter, so there were always wood scraps that we turned into forts and hideouts. Inspired by watching cowboys and Indian on TV, we wrapped gasoline soaked rags on the tips of arrows and shot them around the backyard. Unfortunately, it was a very dry summer and the grass caught on fire. By the time we extinguished it with a garden hose, half the Pickens’ yard was burnt black.

Bobby and I were a unit. What one of us did, the other would do. There were times when our togetherness had consequences. Once we ate a box of chocolates. That night we learned that Exlax is not candy. It was Bobby who coaxed me into smoking my first cigarette. His dog wasn’t using its house, so we crawled inside to puff and cough. When I went home my mom asked why I smelled like a cigarette. I gave a lame excuse and failed the breath-a-lizer test.

My parents said I needed friends besides Bobby. They had a legitimate concern. The Pickens’ were a carbon copy of the horrible Herdmans’ in the book, *The Greatest Christmas Pageant Ever*. They didn’t go to church. Both parents and children used “colorful” language. Maybe I thought that by being Bobby’s friend, I could bring out the good in him. Instead, he brought the mischief in me.

But despite the reservations, through thick and thin, Bobby and I were buddies, and one day we expressed our friendship in deepest way we could imagine. We became blood brothers. It was his idea, not mine. No one knew about AIDS back then. I was hesitant, not about disease, but about cutting my finger to draw blood. We didn't make a pledge or say anything goofy. We just interlocked fingers on the wounds with an unspoken understanding that our friendship meant something. We would look out for each other. We would keep each other's secrets. We would defend each other. We would be there for each other.

We were brothers bound by blood, but it didn't prevent us from getting mad. We fought more than we protected each other. At times, our fathers stepped in, made us shake hands and tell each other we were sorry. We made amends-- until the next altercation. Eventually we joined different circles of friends and our lives went in different directions.

Our blood brotherhood wasn't enough to hold us together. Blood isn't always enough to keep families together, is it, even among those who share a bloodline. Conflict is an inevitable part of all relationships. Dealing with it is hard, which is why we try so hard to avoid it.

Jesus knew that his disciples would not function as a happy family. There was jealousy. There were turf issues. They argued about who was the greatest. After the church was established Peter and Paul fought over whether Gentiles had to become Jews before they became Christian. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is filled with conflict between people and between people and God. It makes you wonder how the church managed to survive all these centuries, what with all the controversies over theology, authority, biblical interpretation, doctrine, and the color of the sanctuary carpeting.

How has it survived? Blood—not ours, but his. Jesus' blood is our bond. We are his body. Each person is a valued part of it. The early Brethren believed that every member was to be *"a fit vessel for the Lord."* Being a fit vessel meant living in a manner

consistent with the gospel and being rooted in nurturing, supportive relationships with other Christians.

We do not take relationships lightly. The Church of the Brethren makes such a big deal of baptism because it is the beginning of a personal commitment to Jesus, *AND* a commitment to the community of faith. In baptism we declare our love for Jesus *and* fellow Christians. *“Let us all so love each other and all selfish claims deny, so that each one for the other will not hesitate to die...”* This is heavy stuff.

We do not take relationships lightly, therefore we do not take conflict lightly. When people say there is no conflict in their church, I’m tempted to reply, *“That’s too bad. Your church must not be doing much of anything.”* When churches take risks and directions change, the boat rocks. Emotions ignite. Feelings fray. Getting through such times can strengthen the church, if handled with care.

Despite our best intentions, we are fallible people afflicted with a sin problem. We say and do things unintentionally and otherwise that hurt people and weaken the church. We have been through conflict before, and we can count on it in the future. The challenge is hammering it out without hammering each other. In Matthew 18 we find Jesus’ method of resolution. *“If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you.”*

When he said this, the issue wasn’t hurt feelings, but damaged reputations. In the culture of that day, having honor and a good name was everything. The worst thing a person could do to another was tarnish their reputation by slander, spreading gossip, rumors, or innuendo. Building your reputation required scoring points by whatever means you could. The “point scoring” is reminiscent of today’s, “Yo’ Mama” duels. *“Yo’ Mama is so old, when she was born, the Dead Sea was just getting sick!” Yo’ Mama is so ugly, when she was born, the doctor slapped your grandma!” “Yo’ Mama is so dumb, she cooked her own complimentary breakfast.” “Yo’ Mama is so short, she poses for trophies.”*

One-upmanship has no place in the church. In Christ, every one has honor. In the church, we protect everyone's reputation. Jesus didn't distinguish between hurt that is deliberate or unintentional. Either way, it is the responsibility of the one who is offended to take the first step. *"If a believer hurts you, go tell him. Work it out."*

This is backwards to us. We usually think the offender should take the first step. "Why should I go to him? He's the one who treated me like dirt."

Step one in dealing with broken relationship calls the offended to go to the offender and tell the truth. If it works, thank God. If not, then take one or two others from the church with you. Deuteronomy 19: 15 says, *A single witness shall not prevail against a man for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed; only on the evidence of two or three witnesses, shall a charge be sustained.* In a court of law it is called corroboration.

Our culture says that whatever a person does is no one's business but his own. Individuals get to decide what is right for them. It's a free country and no one is in a position to judge. In other words, you're on your own. People who believe this eventually get around to making a mess of their own and others lives.

In the church, we believe that behavior matters. A person's behavior can have a negative impact upon the community, and because we love the person and the Christ's body, we are obliged to speak the truth.

When I was young, two brothers in my home church ran a gas station. It was the pre-convenience stores days, but they sold non-automotive items, including magazines. A number of members bought gas at their station. One day while an attendant refueled his car, a deacon noticed a magazine with pictures that showed a lot of skin, and it wasn't the Dermatology Quarterly.

The concern of one deacon didn't get the message across. A visit from two deacons did the trick.

The visit wasn't meant to scold or shame. It wasn't meant to reject but to restore. The deacons in my little church cared enough to risk speaking the truth in love. Back then they took seriously the importance of helping every member of the church become "a fit vessel for the Lord." The church cared enough for the brothers and the rest of the church to help everyone remain faithful to their baptismal vows. Unfortunately, there was a period in our denomination when church discipline was handled in unloving ways that resulted in a lot of hurt and broken relationships.

In response to the abuses maybe we have gone too far the other way by choosing to let situations slide or looking the other way. Since when did it become necessary to be told that, *friends don't let friends drive drunk?* Friends look out for each other. Friends owe it to friends to tell them the truth, even if it complicates the relationship. If we believe the church's foundation is the love of Christ, then we owe it to each other to tell the truth.

This isn't my favorite passage of the Bible. I don't like it at all. I don't like confronting. I don't like being confronted. But Matthew 18 is an appropriate text for Labor Day because the kind of love it calls for is hard work. Someone else said this about the text: *"It disturbs me, but at the same time, the reminder that what we do matters in the church and for the church makes this a powerful and welcome word."*

I'm just about done, but let me mention the third step to resolving conflict. "If the one at fault doesn't listen to you or the witnesses, tell the church, and if he still won't yield, treat him like a Gentile or tax collector." Many have taken this to mean that after step three you can wipe your hands clean. You're off the hook. Write the turkey off. It sounds reasonable... until you ask the question, "How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors?"

Eugene Peterson captures Jesus' point in The Message. "If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start all over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love." The love of Jesus doesn't give up. You don't suppose he expects the same of us, do you?

Matthew 18 ends with familiar words. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them." I love this promise. I am moved whenever it is spoken in prayer. What an assurance. He's with us when we pray together, sing together, fellowship together, and work together. But this is not what it means in this text. It means Jesus is with us when we care enough to tell the truth, test friendship, risk relationships, and ask for and offer forgiveness. When we do this, we don't have to look for Jesus. He's right there—him whose love makes us blood brothers and sisters, him whose love makes us the church.