

Cleaning the Rolls

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Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church

Sunday, September 7, 2008; Bryn Mawr, PA

Matthew 18:15-20

“...whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Movement 1 – Self-righteous Christians

There was a problem in the church. There was a problem with one particular member, a problem of behavior and action. There was a problem that was causing a division, a rift, a wound that was growing. There was a problem in the church. Actually, there were a number of problems. If it was just one individual creating difficulty, that would be one thing. Yet it was a number of individuals who were creating the rift and making the waves. One member was known to come to church with the smell of alcohol on his breath, walking a little loopy and acting more than just a little inebriated. Another member was known for her biting remarks, often offending and hurting other members of the church. A third and fourth member were having an affair and showing no remorse. There were questions of financial shenanigans, constant gossip and a general feeling of unrest in the church. No, it was not one problem but many problems that were growing like tumors in the church, threatening to slowly kill the institution that had been a source of life for so many.

There was a problem in the church and the leadership, the pastor, the Council, and other members of the congregation were wondering how to handle it.

“Matthew 18:15-20!” This seemed to be the perfect, the obvious solution. Those who were causing trouble, those who were causing difficulty should be confronted and told to change their ways or leave the community. This seemed to be a good, easy answer to the problems. It would be like cleaning the rolls, cleaning out all of the members who you don’t particularly want or prefer in the church and things would then run smoothly.

Clean out the rolls. There seems to be an impression of Christians that fits this model. There seems to be a view of Christianity that fits this approach and model to dealing with church conflicts. We need to clean out the rolls. After all, this was the practice of Lower Merion Baptist Church in the early 1800s. Mary Armstrong was given a six month probation because she was hanging up another man’s laundry and seen with him late at night. Other members were asked to leave because they would indulge in the drink a little too much, they attended other churches, or they were engaged in one behavior or another that just seemed unbecoming of the church. The rolls need to be cleaned if the church is to stay right, true and pure.

Such an image of Christianity is found in the cinema again and again. The play and movie *Inherit the Wind* depicts a pastor and his flock as folks quick and ready to cast out anyone who would question and wonder about the writings of Charles Darwin. Cleaning the rolls. Hawthorne’s classic work, *The Scarlet Letter* tells a story of a puritan town casting out a woman and her daughter because she had the child out of wedlock. Cleaning out the rolls.

It is like we have a desire to be a morally pure bar of soap, only able to clean away the dirt, but unable to collect any dirt itself. If a piece of the soap is impure we cut and cast it off. It is a drive and a desire for a puritanical righteousness, moral perfection

and we buy into it. Do we not temper our clothes, our speech, and our personality for Sunday mornings? We don't want anything that can be criticized to show or be seen by the members of the church community. We don't want to be judged or even worse cast out of the community. We want to stay on the rolls so we adopt the moral perfection that we assume is supposed to be upheld in the Christian context.

The gospel lesson for today, the reading from Matthew 18:15-20 seems to feed the fodder for such an understanding and approach to Christianity. We are given the steps, the rules, the procedure for how to confront and cast out, how to cut off, how to clean our rolls. Approach someone in private, approach them with two or three and then approach them as a church and finally you can cast them off into the wilderness never to be welcomed again into the church. A shunning is acceptable and expected. Cleaning out the rolls.

Movement 2 – The Free Church

What would it solve? What would it solve to clean house in such a drastic and dramatic way? In a church with so many problems, with so much turmoil, what would be solved by cleaning out the rolls but reducing the size of the congregation to half or less of what is there. Further, how would such a drastic approach help those who are causing such turmoil? How would such a dramatic approach to church conflict and issues help the one who is drinking get past his problems, the critical individual learn compassion, and the couple in an affair find a moment of reconciliation with each other. What would it solve to clean out the rolls.

In Matthew 7:1 we find those powerful words, "Judge not, so that you may not be judged." Should not these words hold meaning as well? Should we not take them seriously? After all, we all have our own skeletons, we all have our own difficulties and instead of playing the harsh, critical and condemning hand, we should be the supportive, loving and caring community that is there for those who are living a destructive lifestyle when they realize they need the help. With the rise of the mega movement of churches, religion has become much more personal, much more individual and we should not be so hasty to judge, criticize, condemn and ostracize from the community. I have my relationship with Jesus, you have yours and we need to respect each other's differences. Judge not.

Perhaps you have heard such a response to the critical critique that many Christians clasp onto. Perhaps you have heard such a retort, and have wondered. Wondered what such an approach to Christianity and the community would lead to. Wondered if such an approach would be beneficial for Christianity in the long run. We are supposed to be accepting, but how accepting.

A motivational speaker had gone to Springfield to help the town with their anger issues, abandonment issues, mother issues and any other issue that they may be wrestling with. He is trying to get the community to get in touch with their "inner child." Bart Simpson, board with the presentation makes an off-handed remark which leads him to be invited onto the stage. When asked why he would say such a thing Bart's response is, "I just do what I feel like" which becomes the advice of the motivational speaker. Do what you feel like, be like the boy.

Is that the way church is supposed to be, a place where people are accepted no matter what and they can just do what they feel like? Is it a place where any hint of

judging is such an anathema that Christianity becomes a *laissez faire* community and context? To a degree it is, because we do not want to create any waves. We let that one individual speak to us in a rude and hostile way because we don't want to create a scene. We look past the drinking because that is just his way. We ignore the affair because they seem so happy together. The church becomes a free church with little to no boundaries except for the boundaries of individual relativity and a personal understanding of how one is supposed to have a relationship with Christ.

But on the other hand, people will stay in the church. People will feel comfortable, welcomed and isn't that what we want in the church. Perhaps, maybe this would be the best way to be a church.

Movement 3 – Images and Reflections

Neither is good. Neither offers a holistic and positive way to be a community to be a church. We have two poles, two extremes of the church and neither seems to offer a good way to handle the inevitable church conflict which will arise again and again. Neither way seems good or positive towards dealing with difficulties between members and amongst members.

On the one hand we have a strong, judgmental approach that seems quick to cut and quick to judge. It is an approach that has permeated the contemporary image of the church. Ask a non-Christian to describe us, they say what they think about us and you may very well hear them say something along the lines that Christians are self-righteous, condemning and criticizing people who are always looking to show and tell how they are better than others. Christians are people who disguise themselves with words of love and peace, but under the cloak of such rhetoric one can find a dagger of judgment ready to cut you down in a moment's notice. Christians are self-righteous, condemning and critical people who think of themselves as better than everyone else.

These churches, these Christians exist and they color the imagination and the image of Christianity that permeates in the world. In an early episode of *Alley McBeal* a male editor of a feminist magazine was fired because he was a member of the Southern Baptist Convention and the SBC had released a document stating that women could not preach, teach, and in general lead. The head of the magazine found this statement offensive and assumed all Southern Baptists carried the same thoughts. She fired her editor.

This impression of Christianity is very real and pervasive in the world. It shapes how people view us and judges us.

Yet, on the other hand the image of the church as a "do as you will" kind of place also exists. Many churches are seen as places that preach a moral piety but would not demand it of any of their members. Many churches are seen as places that look the other way with impropriety, with indecent actions and often ignore the faults of others. To be a Christian means nothing because nothing has to change whether you are a member of a church or not. There are no demands; no expectations except that you attend church every now and again and hopefully give some money to keep things going.

When I was spending some time in Tijuana I learned that this was an image of Christianity that the Baptist church was strongly trying to disprove. In a culture that was highly Catholic, in a culture where people were expected to attend, have mass, and do much more the label of "Christian" lost most of its meaning. So the Baptists were trying

hard to show they were different, that their lives have changed. When I was there with a youth group (I was a leader), we had to make sure we dressed in a modest way, we did not drink or swear or smoke. We did not want to be seen as a *lasaze faire* kind of church.

Then there is the church that speaks and pushes a hyper-critical approach to the world, while its own members are deep in their own ---- and everyone within the church looks the other way. This is the best, or the worst of both worlds.

Either approach, either way does not seem satisfactory because either way is missing something essential. Something is missing that people yearn, that people need, that may even be the true and real reason why people are drawn to Christ and the church in the first place. Something is missing in the critical condemning and in the liberal accepting.

Movement 4 – We Are Community

We are a community. When wrestling with the implications, the images, and the difficulties of church conflict, tension and rifts we need to remember who and what we are. We are a community. We are not any community. We are not just a community that gathers because we like each other, because we like the building, or because the name strikes our fancy. There is something more, something deeper that binds us together. We are a community, called, formed, named and gathered by Christ. We are a community of grace, a community of glory, a community of Christ. Matthew 18:20 reminds us of our very essence, “for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” We are gathered in Christ’s name. We are a community because and for the sake of Christ. We are a community, a Christian community, and that is what binds us together.

This means we stand for something. This means we have some boundaries, some lines that cannot be crossed. Anyone is welcome to attend, to participate in worship, mission and other parts of the life of the church but one cannot be a member, be an actual part of the community if one does not profess Christ as savior. We are a community.

We find this perhaps most profoundly at the communion table. For at the table is where the community of Christ gathers. At the table all who call themselves Christians are welcome to come and remember the powerful and vivid memories of our savior’s final meal and moments before his crucifixion. If someone has not embraced Christ as savior, than the event is only a meal, an eating of a piece of bread and a small drink of juice. The event does not hold the same kind of depth and meaning that believers would find. What would it look like if some of us approached the table with a sacred sentimentality and others as if it were just another picnic lunch? A line is drawn. We are a Christian community.

And as a Christian community we are called to live in relation with each other. Mirsolv Volf, Paul Fiddes and others say that the members of the church are called to dwell within each other, to participate in each others’ lives just as Christ and God and the Holy Spirit participate with each other. As a Christian community we are called to care for each other, to be concerned for each other and to love each other in the same way that Christ loves us. Verse 15 of this passage emephesis this concern. “If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.” Your relationship is maintained, is kept and the community continues to thrive. We do not look to caste out but to lift up, to support and to help with one another’s walk with Christ.

We are not a free, do as you will community, but a community of people trying to be Christians. We have a line, we have boundaries and they are drawn by Christ.

Movement 5 – Boundaries of Humility

Within that community we approach each other with humility. We are to approach each other with love and grace. We are to hold our boundaries of accountability with humility.

In the fourth season of *The Wire* “Bubbles” a heroin addict who lived on the street brought a young man under his wing. He tried to teach and lead this young man in a good way of life until one night the man that Bubbles had embraced overdosed on some of Bubbles’ heroin. Distraught, Bubbles turned himself in to the police and saw his life a meaningless. It wasn’t until a recovering addict went into Bubbles’ room and embraced him and refused to leave him that Bubbles began to truly face his demons. The recovering addict did not forgive him for his actions; he still held Bubs accountability but did it with a love and compassion of someone who had once been there as well. Accountability with humility.

Do you remember the story of King David and Nathan the prophet? David had an affair, and then had the woman’s husband sent to the front lines of battle so he would be killed and David’s good name would be maintained. Nathan approached David, called David to truth, spoke truth to David but did not reject David. Accountability with humility. The truth had to be spoken, but not with a rage and a willingness to sever connections, but a yearning to regain one’s relationship with others and with the Lord.

John Chryostom, a great early preacher, when preaching on this passage exhorted his parishioners to not look for revenge but instead to gain a relationship and call one back to salvation. It is not an act of demanding satisfaction but of reconciliation. The relationships can be regained when accountability is done with humility.

We need these moments of reconciliation. We need these moments of truth and compassion. For if we are wronged then we steep and the relationship is lost. For if the community is hurt then scars from and wounds never heal. We are a community of relationally and to maintain our relationships we must from time to time approach each other with humility.

It may be that we are on the wrong path. It may be that we are headed the wrong way and like David we need someone to steer us in the right direction. Chryostom said in his sermon that David needed the prophet. “He stood in need of a lantern from the prophet” to shine a light in the fog of his life. We rely on others to keep us true to each other and to the Lord.

Here is where the passage gives us good and wise guidance. Approach the other person in private, with compassion and love. Approach the person in such a way that there is little to no shame. Then approach with others, with witness who may say that you are wrong, that you are being to harsh or that the other needs to change. Then bring it to the community who will rejoice or will mourn, who will offer support and will never close the door. If someone is being destructive and refuses to reconcile and change then it is better for that person to leave, but if that person ever changes welcome them back, just as Jesus welcomed the repentant Gentile and the changed tax collector. This passage is surrounded with passages of grace from the child being first in the kingdom of God to the

parable of the Lost Sheep. It is not a passage of judgment but one of grace, of reconciliation and blessing. Accountability yes, but accountability with humility.

Movement 6 – Equalizing Grace

And let us all remember that it is from Christ that we receive grace. Let us remember that we all need Christ's grace and Christ's glory. We all have dirt on our faces. We all have been walking in the mud, we all need Christ.

We do not demand perfection but love.

We do not demand a high moral code but a code of forgiveness.

We do not demand outward piety encourage inward peace.

We offer love.

Let us be a church of acceptance of all. Let us be a church that calls people to Christ, that encourages people in their walk with Christ, and continues to grow towards Christ. Let us be a church where someone can say, "Just as I am," they welcomed me. They loved me and called me and helped me to be. The child of God, the child of Christ, growing and loving earnestly and right. Just as I am, without one plea, just as I am they welcomed me.

AMEN