



March 10, 2019

## Can You Let Go of Wrongs? Pastor Vern Christopherson


### **Matthew 18:15-35 NRSV**

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. <sup>18</sup>Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup>Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup>For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

<sup>21</sup>Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Have you ever gotten angry at someone in the church or maybe gotten your feelings hurt? I’m going out on a limb here but, people being people, I have a hunch you may have experienced something upsetting along the way. If so, what did you do about it? Grin and bear it? Tell it to a friend or two? Stop coming to church for a while or even think about joining another church?

There’s a question for us coming out of today’s scripture reading: Did any of you go directly to that person, and confront him or her about the wrong, in the hopes that you could clear the air? It’s a tremendously hard thing that Jesus is asking us to do. Most of us aren’t wired this way. We worry that the persons who have wronged us won’t see it the way we do. Or they might get offended. Or worse yet, they might tell us to mind our own business.



Lent is a time for confession. I'll start. Sometimes pastors themselves are the ones who hurt people's feelings. I'll never forget one Christmas Eve in my first congregation. I was serving in a small town in Kansas. Christmas worship was packed. And for whatever reason, a number of babies –how should I put this –were inspired to join the choir of angels. One particular baby must have cried quite loudly for 15 to 20 minutes...all the way through a couple of hymns and most of the way through my sermon.


There's really no right way to deal with such things. The young mom or dad did not take the baby out. Maybe they didn't know what to do. As time went on, the congregation grew more and more fidgety. And, to be honest, I got more and more perturbed. But somehow we survived. Jesus was born. The shepherds came for a visit, and some wisemen too. We sang Silent Night, and thankfully it was really rather quiet by then.

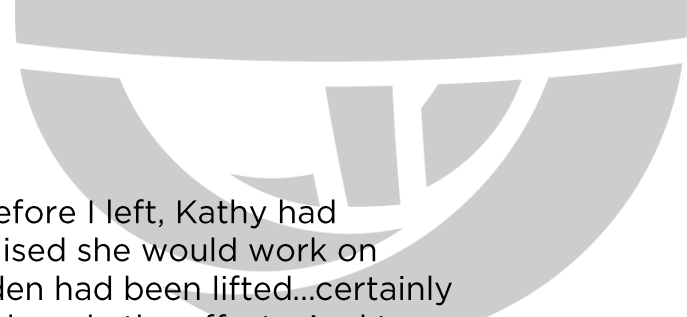
I was shaking hands as worshippers were leaving. When a brand-new mom named Kathy approached me – with a baby in her arms – I made a feeble attempt at humor. It was a dumb thing to say. I asked her if it was her baby that was making *all that racket*. I didn't think that it was. I thought it was another baby. I was merely trying to relive some tension. But this mom took my words personally. She got her feelings hurt.

I didn't know how much pain I had caused until I heard back through the grapevine. There's nothing like a small-town grapevine to spread the news. Kathy and her husband had quit coming to church. I felt terrible about it. I had wounded them. I tried calling them once, twice, maybe thirty times. Nobody ever answered. I was hoping to apologize. I didn't want to be known as a pastor who hurt people's feelings, or worse, who chased people away from the church.

Finally I decided to go out on a limb. Kathy and her husband lived on a farm. One evening I drove out to their place. I said a little prayer and knocked on the door. The husband answered. I asked if I could come in. He said yes. When Kathy saw me, she stopped in her tracks. She gave her husband a withering look, as if to say, "What have you done?" Still, before long we were sitting at the kitchen table. I started: "I was wondering if we could talk. I think I hurt your feelings on Christmas Eve. I'm very sorry for what I said. I didn't mean it. I thought it was another baby. Besides, it was a poor attempt at humor. I shouldn't have been making fun of any young parents bringing their babies to church."

These sorts of conversations are never easy. There are no guarantees of how they'll be received. My words felt awkward at best. But one thing led





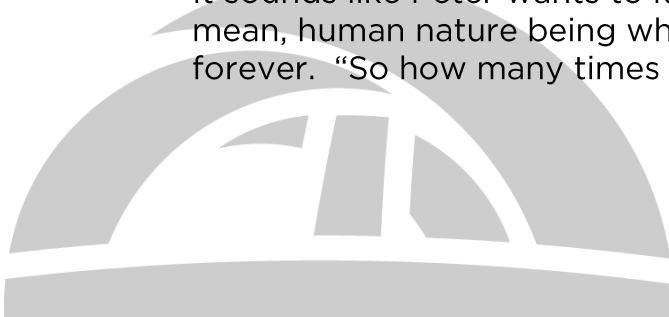
to another. We talked through some things. Before I left, Kathy had graciously accepted my apology, and she promised she would work on forgiving me. I walked away feeling that a burden had been lifted...certainly for me and maybe for them too. I was glad I had made the effort. And to this day, some 37 years later, every time I hear a baby crying in church, I think of Kathy. And I whisper a prayer of gratitude that young parents have made an effort to bring their little one to worship.

Our scripture reading for today has some sharp edges. Jesus wants to get to the bottom of church conflict...and maybe any conflict. In so many words, Jesus asks his followers: *Can you let go of a wrong?* The list of wrongs is never-ending, of course. I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one here who's stuck his foot in his mouth at the worst possible moment. Jesus' advice to us is quite specific: "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Like it or not, that's probably a good place to start.

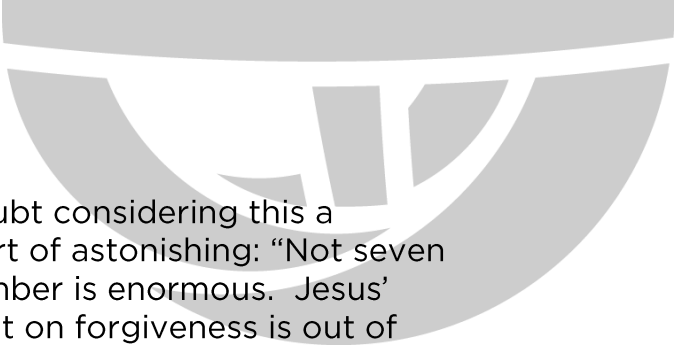
There are some churches that follow these directions to the letter. In my case, I suppose, that means Kathy should have come to me and pointed out my fault. And I'd like to think I would have been open to that. On the other hand, that probably seemed almost impossible when the one in the wrong is your pastor. So I took it upon myself to make the first move.

Rather than be concerned about following Jesus' advice step by step, I think it's important to reach out to the person who upset you, no matter who started it, and to reach out in love. Here's the truth: When you do reach out, you don't know what will happen. You may get the door slammed in your face. But you may take a step toward forgiveness and healing. And one or both of you may be able to let go of a wrong.

So, why is this important? What's at stake here? Just so we don't miss the point, Jesus tells a story about a little lost lamb immediately before sharing his advice. What's at stake is not only the patching up of a relationship, but doing everything we can to go looking for the one who is lost, and if at all possible, to restore him or her to the fold. A big part of that restoration can be seen in the heart of the shepherd, who time and again shows that he's willing to do whatever it takes to reach out to sinners in love.



Immediately after Jesus gives his direction, Peter speaks up for the disciples: "I hear what you're saying about seeking restoration, Lord, but suppose I'm the victim of someone else's sin, how often should I forgive?" It sounds like Peter wants to know if there's a statute of limitations on sin. I mean, human nature being what it is, this sin-forgiveness loop can go on forever. "So how many times have do I have to let go of a wrong? As many



as seven times?" Peter asks the question, no doubt considering this a generous number. Jesus' answer is nothing short of astonishing: "Not seven times, Peter, but seventy-seven times." The number is enormous. Jesus' point is that, for his followers, trying to set a limit on forgiveness is out of bounds. It runs the risk of forgetting just how much forgiveness God shares with each of us.

Friends, you might find yourself in a messy situation right now. Maybe you've had a run-in with someone at church, or in your family, or at work, or with a friend. Why not begin with what Jesus suggests, and go to that person, no matter who started it? Say a prayer and do your best to talk it out. Be ready to apologize if need be. Make sure you do it all in love. And who knows, it may be that you will take a step or two toward heading and forgiveness. And at the end of your efforts, perhaps it will feel like one little lost lamb has come home. Amen.

