

ACT AS IF



Scripture:

Psalm 149

¹Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful. ²Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King. ³Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre. ⁴For the LORD takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory. ⁵Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their couches. ⁶Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, ⁷to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, ⁸to bind their kings with fetters and their nobles with chains of iron, ⁹to execute on them the judgment decreed. This is glory for all his faithful ones. Praise the LORD!

Matthew 18:15-20

(This is Jesus speaking to his disciples about how to get along.)

¹⁵“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. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, 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. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

This is the word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



ACT AS IF

Sing to the Lord a new song! Not an old one but a new song!

Make melody with the lyre and tambourine. Psalm 149 is a perfect psalm for the come back Sunday for our choir! We are so grateful they are back and they have added to their ranks! Wonderful!

Now our second reading assigned for today, Matthew 18, is not quite as upbeat as Psalm 149 is it. It has some serious instructions for the disciples about diplomatically and authentically addressing sin in one another.

Jesus proposes talking with the person who made the mistake directly first and

then, if there is no resolution, he encourages talking as a small group face to face rather than talking behind backs and not confronting the problem at all. Jesus is all about addressing problems face to face rather than beating around the bush causing an undercurrent of bad feelings.

BE OPEN AND HONEST

I like that, don't you? We need one another in community to be authentic and open and honest all the time. God knows divisive negative talk is what brings down a church or any organization for that matter. Jesus knows that the best method for developing a church requires open honest behavior.

Jesus understood human beings need to be in contact with others, consult with others, and generally live lives of faith in community with others for strength and shared resources. All primates do this. But monkeys handle problems with screaming and fighting.

So how are we different than a colony of monkeys? You might think not much! No we are very different. Verbally helping one another deal honestly with sinful behavior is a homo sapien way of handling problems.

BE RECEPTIVE TO CORRECTION

God created us with a unique ability to get along and to promote peaceful behavior in one another. The difficult part is being receptive to correction from fellow Christians. We all feel ashamed when people point out our human failings? I do.

So how do we handle being corrected and set back on the path of faithful discipleship?

We act as if we have a clean slate once things are resolved and we start over with an understanding that God was with us in our time of failing and God will be with us in our successful achievements as well.

Our job is to go forward into the future with hope and a new determination to get along for the benefit of the church.

IMAGINE THAT JESUS IS IN THE ROOM

One method for not succumbing to the temptation to be destructive or competitive towards one another is imagining that Jesus is in the room.

Take a moment right now and recognize Christ's presence is here. Most of us, when we are truly aware of his presence, clean up our act.

This happened when I was working at the Prosecutor's office in Morris County, New Jersey, as the head of the Sexual Assault Response Team there. The prosecutor said that he could tell the detectives and assistant prosecutors were swearing less, and trying to behave better in my presence. I was surprised because I didn't think I was doing anything to promote that.

WHO WE REPRESENT

I told him I didn't mean to act as if I was "holier than thou" or anything. But he said it wasn't how I behaved, it was WHO I represented.

I thought about that for a long time. It is a blessing and a burden that all disciples of Christ carry with them. It is the same for all of us. When people find out you go to church then you are automatically a representative of Christ; you are ambassadors of the Presbyterian Church of the Roses. (Especially when you wear your gorgeous new t-shirt out into the community.) So I hope and pray we show our best behavior when we identify as a member of this church. Because when you do, you are positively affecting the behavior of those around you as well, even when you aren't aware.

WHERE TWO OR MORE ARE GATHERED

Jesus said, "When two or more are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them." This scripture passage was said in the context of God approving of this way of

handling sin and disputes. God wants us to work together in solving problems and issues that present obstacles to the work of God in the church family.

This formula is to first try to confront the sin, and reconcile with people one on one. And if that doesn't work, bring a few more people along to encourage authenticity, forgiveness, and healing. But there is a way to prevent these problems in the first place. Act as if.....

- Act as if Christ is right in the middle of the conversations you have.
- Act as if God is listening in to your phone calls and reading your emails.
- Act as if God is present in and around you all the time, because God is! – NOT as a judge to punish you for wrong doing, but to remind you to do all things with faith, hope and love as the inspiration for your actions.

**A good mantra to say to yourself is:
"I will no longer say or do
anything that has the potential
to cause misery in others."**

Yet sometimes we cause misery accidentally because we don't realize our behavior offends others. That is when authenticity and honesty in relationships must be clear so mutual understanding can heal the situations. We must each own our own issues and let others know when our boundaries have been crossed or our feelings have been hurt. Otherwise a wound is created and covered over, that just festers and gets bigger underneath causing an infection that can spread to other people.

START THE HEALING PROCESS

When we are honest in our relationships with each other we allow the wound to be exposed. Only then can we clean it out by sharing our feelings of hurt, and allow forgiveness to start the healing process.

Yet, there may be scars left over that remind us of the wound. Every human has a scar somewhere. None of us are spared.

I believe that is why Jesus suffered and carried his scars with him to heaven, to reassure us that God understands the scars we carry.

Reverend Jan Richardson, an artist and a pastor has a similar perspective on this passage. She said:

"Jesus speaks in Matthew chapter 18 to the challenge and the wonder of being in community. He recognizes that being his follower, being part of his body, will not relieve us of brokenness.

JESUS' PLAN IS CLEAR

"Jesus is clear that being Christian means that discord is not allowed to fester and infect the entire body. Christ lays out a plan that requires his followers to engage a brother or sister who has done harm. His plan is one that seeks to preserve the dignity of the one perceived to have done wrong and to restore his or her relationship with the community.

"Christ's blueprint for dealing with conflict is an ambitious one. It places a lot of trust in a church's ability to discern what constitutes a sin and to deal with one another in ways that are both forthright and loving.

"To engage one another in the way that Jesus describes in our gospel poses challenges. We each have our own sins to reckon with, and there are times when we act out of our brokenness rather than our lovingness. It's often so much easier to point toward what we see as sinful in another's life than to deal with the ways that we ourselves bring harm to the body of Christ. Remember in Matthew 7: 3 it says: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?"

Dealing with the sources of conflict in the church requires profound humility on our part. Yet the health of the community requires us to be vigilant about rooting out the sources of harm.

Christ calls us to do so with an authentic spirit that acknowledges our own brokenness and failures and seeks to restore relationships when possible.

Engaging one another around the most difficult challenges of living together means that we have to know each other. It compels us to not only recognize one another's shortcomings but also take time to know each other's stories. Try to walk a mile in each other's shoes.

THE POWER OF HARMONY

Jesus recognized the power of this kind of knowing. For all the challenges of conflict in a community, the power of harmony is stronger. "Truly I tell you," Jesus goes on to say in this passage, "if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Where we find a place of connection amid conflict, where we gather in the name of the one who calls us to be his body, where we give ourselves to knowing one another, that is not only astounding, it is a miracle that moves heaven and earth.

THINK ABOUT WHAT CONNECTS US

Jesus underscores this by telling his followers what he has recently told Peter: that what they bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and what they loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. In the context of this passage about our life together as followers of Christ, his words about binding and loosing inspires us to think about what connects us, those threads that seem so strong at times and yet so weak at other times."

On this September day, what binds you? What holds you together with others? What have you learned from the scars you carry? How can you use those scars to help this church represent Jesus Christ to the world around us? Amen.

Benediction: Robert Louis Stevenson wrote a funny and true poem about getting along. He said, "There is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it behooves all of us not to talk about the rest of us.

May you feel God's presence with you always and may the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit bring you peace and harmony now and forever more. Amen



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