

Opening Up or Closing Down

There are only a few texts in the Bible that can stand alone. Most texts are best understood when they are put into context with the surrounding verses as well as the book that the text is found. Knowing what the author's intent and purpose of writing the book helps to give us a framework with which to approach a particular text. Sometimes, people treat texts as if they were stand-alone texts without any connection to other verses in the Bible. The Gospel text today is one of those texts that have been interpreted as a stand-alone text. This is unfortunate, because I think we miss the true meaning of the text when we consider it by itself.

When this text is considered as a stand-alone text, it is typically taken as a way to resolve conflict, or disagreement, between two people within the church. If you look at many congregations' constitutions, you probably will find a process similar to the one that Jesus puts forth in the text. This process is actually in line with the Jewish practice at that time and can be found in the book of Deuteronomy. The Gentile and tax collector were shunned by the Jewish community and at the Temple were restricted to where they could go. Today, when a conflict does arise in a congregation, this process gets set aside with people rushing to the last step, that is to get rid of the offending person. The working concept of conflict resolution that many churches have is that 'if we just get rid of the ones who disagree with us, then our church will be fine.' It's been said there are two kinds of congregations, those who have had conflict and those who have not yet had conflict. Much like there are two kinds of drivers, those who have hit a deer and those who are yet to hit a deer. The point is there will be conflict, it is the response to it that is important. This text is used as an example of how to use that conflict in a constructive manner.

However, when we put this text into the context of Chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel account, then we get a different understanding of this text. The verses before this text are about Jesus' parable about the one lost sheep out of 100 sheep; and the verses after these are about how many times to forgive and the parable of the unforgiving servant. These verses are no longer a 'how to' guide on how to discipline and get rid of those with whom we disagree; rather these verses are actually about the restoration of relationship to the community **and** forgiveness. It is about opening up our community of faith rather than closing it down to those who disagree with us. These verses become less about showing how we were 'wronged' by the other person, but more about extending forgiveness and acceptance to those who disagree with us.

We also need to keep in mind that in many of Jesus' parables, He uses a twist upon the acceptable, traditional behaviors to make us come to a different conclusion of what we are to do. In this case, when we get to the part about treating the offending member like a *Gentile* or tax collector, we expect that we are to shun them as had been the tradition up to that point. However, when we consider how Jesus treated these people who others shunned, we get a different 'instruction' of how to treat them. Jesus did not shun anyone; He always welcomed them and tended to their needs, whether it was spiritual or physical as well as extending forgiveness. The Pharisees complained that Jesus associated with and shared meals with the tax collectors and *Gentiles*. So, this gives us a different end to the 'process' of how to deal with those whom we have a disagreement. Instead of shunning them, excommunicating them, getting them out of 'our' church, we are still to welcome them, tend to their needs, to welcome them, of opening up.

How do we change this process? Consider this story: Once, there were two brothers who lived on adjacent farms. When they first started out, they worked well together, helping each other with planting and harvesting. One day, however, they had a

disagreement and neither wanted to have anything to do with the other brother. One brother was so angry that he wanted to build a fence on the property line, but there was a stream that flowed along the line and he wasn't sure how to build the fence. A handyman happened to stop by and asked if there were any projects that he could do, so the brother explained that he was angry with the other brother and wanted a fence high enough so that he wouldn't have to look at the other brother's property. He showed the handyman where he wanted the fence and then left to do his chores. At the end of the day the brother came to see how the handyman was coming along. To his surprise, he saw his brother crossing a bridge that wasn't there in the morning. The brother thought that it was gesture of reconciliation and this led to the two brothers making amends with each other.

You see, what Jesus is telling his followers to do is to break the 'traditions' of excluding people with whom we have a disagreement and try to find a way to build the bridges that restores the relationships, not just individually, but within the community as well. This text then fits in well with all that Jesus had been teaching and living - that to live in God's kingdom, then we must do things differently. Instead of looking at it from a selfish point of view, we see that it is the relationship that is important. We are also to see the situation through the other person's eyes. Doing so gives us compassion to look to the needs of others and do what we can to address those needs.

This is a tough thing to do. We naturally want to be 'right' and get justice when we have been wronged. We want the other person to be shamed for the wrong that they did and to let the world know what a 'bad' person they were. We lose sight of the fact that they, too, are a child of God and deserve grace and forgiveness, the same grace and forgiveness that we receive and expect. I know that granting forgiveness can be one of the hardest things that we do, but maybe that is why Jesus gave us this 'procedure' to

follow. Maybe those witnesses are able to help us to see the need for forgiveness and help with the restoration of the relationship.

Let's consider when the shoe is on the other foot and that we are the one who wrongs a fellow member. Being human, each of us will sin at some time or another. When we are the one in today's Gospel text that does the 'wronging' would we want a chance to have an opportunity to explain our actions, as well as opportunities to admit to our wrongful actions and ask for forgiveness? Which path would we want be on - the one that leads to our being shunned from the community or one that leads to restored relationships within the community through repentance and forgiveness?

By being a member of a church, a congregation, we are a part of a community that is brought together by the common belief of Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Being a child of God, we are given gifts through the Holy Spirit. Sometimes, those gifts are not used for the betterment of the community and conflict arises. However, by having this 'procedure' of how to extend the same grace and forgiveness that we receive from God, we are assured that no one needs to be a 'lost sheep'. That is where we can find the Good News in this text.

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