

**First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
September 4, 2011
Rev. Diana Hartman
Worship Theme: Fighting Jesus Style¹
Matthew 18: 15-20**

In reading the 18th chapter of Matthew this week and next, we hear Jesus emphasize the importance of Christian Community. In today's reading, speaking to his disciples, Jesus stresses that their faith is not a private matter, something that they can go off by themselves and enjoy alone. Christian faith happens when two or three gather together in Christ's name. Faith is a community affair.

Jesus reminds his disciples that they need each other. Life as one of his disciples is tough and no one can go it alone. Besides, two heads are better than one and two or more can accomplish far more than one person alone. Jesus reminds them that they are family, brothers and sisters in the family of God. And just as family members depend on one another for help, so they must depend on one another. Today, we recognize Seth Reid as our newest brother in our family and we begin to teach him that he can trust us to be there for him.

There is a lot to be learned from living in a healthy family. Having grown up in a family with six children, I think the first thing I learned was that I can't always have my own way. I had to learn the art of compromise, giving up what I wanted at times so that someone else could have what they wanted. Together we learned to share and to work as a team. What we were learning through the give and take of life was how to be fully human.

That's not to say we did not fight. When you share a room with three sisters and one bathroom with eight people in the house, you are bound to bump into one and other when you're in no mood to compromise. So, one of the things you learn to do in a family is to fight, especially, when you have so many brothers and sisters to practice on. We pushed, shoved, hit, screamed, argued, pulled hair and slammed doors. And I'm sure to my parents delight; at times we even tried using the silent treatment and would not speak to one another for hours. More often than not, our fights were short lived. We knew how to fight, but we also knew how to make up and forgive one another for the mean things we did.

As I grew up, I began to realize that all families didn't fight the same way. For some families there is a rule that says, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." If you had a problem with someone else, keep it to yourself. So, whenever something unpleasant happens, silence ensues. Harmony, or the illusion of harmony, is to be maintained at all costs. So pretty soon it becomes the most important thing—more important than telling the truth, more important than doing the right thing, more important than your feelings, and finally, more important than you and the other family members.

In today's reading, Jesus teaches us how to fight Jesus style. He says that in the family of God we don't fight by going around with a smile on our face while inwardly hating. Instead, Jesus advises that in the household of God, when your sister or brother sins against you, you must go and talk to her, and if that doesn't work you must keep going back—taking other people with you—doing everything in your power to regain your sister again.

Jesus' style of fighting takes two interesting stances. First, he says that it is the victim, the person who has been sinned against, that is to take the first step toward reconciliation. Second, what seems most important is mending the relationship, not who is right and who is wrong. When wronged by another, we are to go to that person and listen to one another, over and over again—if our brother refuses to listen, we don't stop there and sweep everything under the rug. We acknowledge that we have lost a brother. But far from

¹ The idea for today's sermon comes from Barbara Brown Taylors Sermon, "Family Fights" found in "The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the gospel of Matthew," pp. 83-90.

shunning him, Jesus commands us never to give up on him, never to stop reaching out in love to him, always to yearn for grace to restore what has been broken, just as Jesus did with the Gentile and tax collector.

This is hard but honest advice. Its advice that we know is right, but is hard to follow. Can you imagine doing exactly as Jesus suggests? Suppose you've been sitting in the pew next to Hector for years. You know him pretty well, he lives just down the street from you. One day you're out using your new snow blower to clear your driveway. Hector drops by and asks if you would mind if he borrowed your blower to clear his drive. He says he'll bring it back in a couple of days.

Being that you are a good Christian, you lend him your new, top of the line snow blower. Several days pass, then a week, two weeks and you haven't seen Hector or your snow blower. So you call Hector and ask him if you can have it back. Hector says he loaned it to the guy next door and while he was using it, his wife called him into the house and when he went out, well, the snow plow had come down the street and splat, the snow blower is no more. Now Hector says this is just a bit of bad luck. But you feel that you have been wronged.

So the first thing you do is go over to Hector's house by yourself to talk about it and for the sake of your friendship you offer to take half the price of the snow blower. But Hector is offended—after all it wasn't his fault, these things happen. So you go home and take out the church directory and call a couple of the church elders to go back to Hector's with you and help you resolve the matter.

The next day, the three of you knock on his door and tell him why you are there. Hector is steaming mad. "Why are you ganging up on me? Why are you trying to give me a bad reputation?" he yells.

You try to explain that you are willing to file a claim with the insurance company if he would just tell what happened. Without really listening, Hector tells you to get off his property before he calls the police.

What do you do next? You call up the church members and ask as many as are able to show up at Hector's house on Saturday. Knowing that he will not answer the door, you carry signs asking him to come out and assuring him that you are his friends. The crowd gathers on his front lawn, the house is dark and silent. After a while, you see Hector peeking out the front window. Sometime later, he opens the door and sheepishly stands on the porch with a check in hand. Everyone cheers, Hector and you embrace and all is well. The End.

I know what you are thinking. "Maybe yes, maybe no. Maybe it works, maybe it doesn't." But how could we know. Have you ever tried such a way of turning a wrong into a right, I know I haven't. Instead, I'm more likely to act like nothing has happened. I'll just ignore the whole thing and maybe it will just go away. Or another strategy might be to give Hector the cold shoulder. You never tell the person what's wrong because that would be rude, so you just shun her. She was in the wrong; let her figure it out. A third strategy is revenge. You never admit that you are at odds with the person. Instead, you tell jokes at his expense or question his character at every turn. And through it all, you keep telling yourself that it makes you feel better, but the truth is that you don't feel any better at all.

Today's reading recommends another approach. Jesus recommends confrontation. The dictionary defines confrontation to mean bringing two people together face to face to sort out what is going on between them. But confrontation is just the thing that most of us would rather avoid. We come up with every excuse not to humbly admit our hurt, not to risk our feelings for a second time, not to seem foolish.

In the Christian community, as in our families, there is something much more important than being right or wrong, and that something is keeping the family together. What makes us Christian is not whether or not we fight, disagree, or wound one another, but how we go about addressing and resolving these issues. Too often, the real issue is not about the sister or brother who sins against us, but our fierce wish to defend ourselves no matter the cost. Unfortunately, we will often forsake our relationships in favor of holding tight to our wounds. In other words, we are all too eager to repay sin with sin.

Perhaps, the first question we should ask ourselves is "Is the relationship worth the risk?" and second "What is more important, being right or being in relationship?" Assuming recovering the relationship is what

you want, then go and try to gain back the relationship. We honor the other person by speaking the truth in love, pouring our whole selves into the process for the sake of our relationship and the community as a whole.

It would be nice if we could go through all this in private, but according to Jesus, there is no such thing as privacy in the family of God. We are confronted, comforted, tested and redeemed by God through one another. Our life together, “where two or three are gathered in my name,” Jesus says, is God’s chief means of being with us. When two estranged Christians come together to work out their problems despite all the anger and hurt that separate them, they are humbled and strengthened by the awareness that Christ is in their midst. It is for his sake that they search for a solution to their problems. In our togetherness, we come to know God or to flee from God’s presence, depending upon how we come to know or flee from one another.

When we fight Jesus’ style, we are called to be the first to reach out, even when we are the ones who have been hurt, even when God knows we have done nothing wrong, even when everything in us wants to fight back—still we are called to community with one another, to act like the family we are. That is how we know God and how God knows us. The heart of the Christian community’s mission is the ministry of reconciliation. That is what we are called to do: to confront and make up, to forgive and seek forgiveness, to heal and be healed—to throw a block party so all the people will come out and see what our joy is all about. All glory and honor be to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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