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*Matthew 18:15-22*

*‘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. 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. 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. 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. 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’*

*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?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.*

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First of all, two quick disclaimers before jumping into the sermon proper.

First of all, any interpretation of this passage that is used to perpetuate or enable cycles of violence or abuse is wrong. Full stop. Forgiveness without healthy boundaries or accountability is dangerous and, sometimes, deadly.

Secondly, many of us understandably get hung up on the line about Gentiles and tax collectors. At first glance, it seems a terribly callous and cruel turn of phrase. However, I think it’s important to ask ourselves the following question before we jump to that conclusion: how did *Jesus* model treating Gentiles, tax collectors, and other persons who his people had been taught to despise?

If you’d like to unpack any of those disclaimers with me, hit me up and let’s talk.

Ok, on to *this* sermon!

We’ve been journeying with the disciple Peter this past month as we approach the final laps of our Lenten journey. We’ve strained our backs with him bringing in an absurdly large catch of fish. We’ve grasped desperately for Jesus’ steady hand with him in a raging storm. We’ve stood proudly with Peter, acknowledging the truth of Jesus as the son of the Living God, the Messiah. And we’ve hung our heads in shame in the moments when we’ve fallen short, getting hung up on our own expectations, preferences, and conveniences instead of God's vision for the Church.

Last week, Peter got it wrong a mere few verses after he had gotten it right. No one likes being rebuked. No one likes being corrected. And certainly no one I know appreciates being called “Satan” or anything like it. It might very well be that Peter’s ego was bruised after last week’s encounter. We all know what it feels like to fail and spend some time licking our wounds. I suspect Peter had done that in the verses between last week’s story and this week’s passage.

And yet, Peter keeps asking. He keeps learning. He keeps growing. He keeps the curiosity flowing.

And *that’s* what makes him such a great example of discipleship. Discipleship isn’t about perfection, or “success” (at least in the terms popular culture would define it). Discipleship is about embracing our need for salvation and graciously responding to the saving hand of Jesus that reaches in to pull us out of the grave time and time and time and time again. Discipleship is understanding that we *always* have more to learn about ourselves and the God who calls us beloved.

And friends, we never lose the capability to learn and grow; at least, not at a physiological level. It has often been quipped that “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” Well, current neuroscience would beg to differ with that adage. As many of you know, I’ve been doing research on what happens to our brains when we sing together as a congregation.

There’s a relatively new concept in the world of neuroscience called *neuroplasticity*. It’s a great scrabble word, if you’re ever able to pull it off! It simply refers to the brain’s malleability, or it’s rather resilient capacity to rewire itself to create new neural pathways.

Early brain research suggested that the brain’s capability to rewire itself ended shortly after birth. Then, research progressed and it was understood that that malleability remained robust well into early adulthood; namely, around the age of 25 years old when the brain’s frontal cortex (which processes decision making and consequences of those decisions) fully develops. However, current brain research has made us aware of the fact that the brain never fully loses its capacity for neuroplasticity. While neuroplasticity may decrease with age, it’s never too late to make new neural connections in order to develop new habits, hobbies, passions, and perspectives.

There are many tools we can utilize to encourage neuroplasticity as we age: exercise, healthy eating, therapy, meditation, and a strong social network, just to name a few. Recent studies have shown promising results in low-dosage ketamine therapy for people with drug-resistant anxiety and depression.

Additionally, and not surprisingly, music (both listening to, creating, and sharing) can stimulate multiple parts of the brain to encourage neuroplasticity. Which is why I believe congregational singing can be a powerful tool in helping us learn new ways to live together as neighbors in these culturally divisive times.

This is, of course, this preacher’s rather long-winded way of saying the following: **the journey of growing in the faith is a life-long practice**. Together, in that spirit, we sing together those words from “Come, Thou Fount:” *teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above.*

*“*Teach me,” Peter says to Jesus in today’s passage. “Help me learn new ways of being.” “Help my brain rewire itself so that I might increase its neuroplasticity.” Ok, that last one might be a bit of a stretch, but you get my meaning. Peter acknowledges that he needs to learn, and that makes him such a great model of faithfulness.

Jesus begins this passage by giving practical teaching regarding *when* (not if!) conflict happens in the church. I’ve always loved this passage exactly for the fact that its very presence in the Gospels confirms the fact that conflict is a natural part of living together as a community. In these hyper-partisan times of division, we can be tempted to think that conflict is a new development in the church. But it’s not. You and I know better than that.

Y’all also know that I love me some verbs and it’s always telling in a passage when a certain verb is repeated.

The verb “listen” is repeated, by my count, four times in a few brief verses in today’s passage. It’s also a verb that, all four times, is attributed to the transgressor and not the transgressed. The message here is simple: **when we mess up, it’s time to start listening**. Without intentional listening, reconciliation cannot happen. Without intentional listening, learning cannot happen. Without intentional listening, discipleship falls flat.

And y’all, listening is not something our current culture lifts up as a value worth pursuing. Rather, we’re taught that the loudest voice in the room is the strongest. We’re taught that influence and trustworthiness are measured by likes and follows, votes and publicity. Here Jesus is presenting what for most of us is an incredibly counter-cultural teaching.

Peter, like many of us, is really good at talking. But in today’s passage, he’s also doing a good job of listening. Jesus gives practical advice on how to solve conflict, but Peter wants to know more. He isn’t finished listening! Tell me, Jesus, how many times are we expected to do this song and dance? Seven times must surely be enough, right?

And here is where Jesus, yet again, gives us a jaw-dropping dose of kingdom wisdom: seventy-seven times! Or, seventy *times* seven depending on how you translate the Greek. It’s absurd, right? Well, yes and no. Culturally, yes, it’s absurd. It was absurd then and it’s absurd now. But just because something is absurd doesn't mean that it isn’t true or worthy of our aspirations. Jesus frequently uses absurdity to teach us about the Kingdom of God. Seventy times seven seems like an awful lot until you know what it’s like to be in a long-term relationship, be it romantic or otherwise. When we live in community together we fall short is countless ways both great and small. And I think Jesus knew that a community without forgiveness as a core value would not be neither sustainable nor transformative.

The message, again, is absurdly simple and messy: the Church of Jesus Christ is a place where we always leave the door open for reconciliation and seek to practice forgiveness as God relentlessly practices forgiveness on us!

But, again, circling back to the disclaimers at the beginning of this sermon, that does not mean that we don’t have need for sexual misconduct politics, or child protection policies, or finance checks and balances. Jesus isn’t calling us to be foolish or to be ignorant of our proclivity for boundary-breaking.

And yet, Peter listens. And yet, we still listen. We listen and we sing to God to “teach us some melodious sonnet” as we try to live together as a neighborhood to play the symphony of God’s grace and share that melody with others. Y’all, it’s no easy thing. And *that’s* precisely why Jesus knew it was important to teach his disciples then and now how to rehearse for when the melody gets messy. Because living together is messy.

But in that messiness comes grace. And in that messiness comes growth, and blessings, and connection, and unexpected wonders.

We may be tempted to think that the collective “brain” of our neighborhoods are beyond reconciliation. We may be tempted to think that the neural pathways are set in stone, never to be reconnected. Our cynicism can give way to the false belief that the “left” neuron and the “right” neuron have been severed beyond repair. But that’s not what the Christian faith teaches. The Christian faith teaches us that reconciliation is possible. Jesus *teaches us* that his followers are held to a higher standard, a model of a different kind of neighborhood; a neighborhood where vengeance and violence need not have the final word.

And so, with Peter, we ask Jesus to forgive us our debts, as he teaches us to forgive our debtors.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**