

“We’re Not Talkin’ Rocket Science Here”

September 7, 2008

Matthew 18:15-22

Romans 13:8-14

Dr. Kipp Wolfe

My fellow Americans! Oh, excuse me. I’ve been watching the political conventions the last two weeks and just got so involved I lost my place for a minute. I do enjoy watching those political conventions. You see democracy at its best, and at its worst. It’s kind of like seeing sausage made. One thing from both conventions that is common to both parties: broken promises. How many promises were made during the last two weeks that we know will be broken, and probably the speakers know. If old Will Rogers were around today he would probably say, “The last time there were that many promises was when Jesus was in the desert for forty days.” Broken promises.

One reason we love Jesus so is because he kept his promises. He not only told the truth, he *was* the truth. We see that truth in our scripture lesson today. This is Matthew’s application of the teaching of Jesus about forgiveness. Remember, the church came along after Jesus had been gone, so this is Matthew taking Jesus’ teaching about forgiveness and applying it to the church. Certainly, in the church we need to hear this.

Is there anything more complicated, more frustrating, more rewarding than human relationships, especially in the church. Now some people might say, “Careful, preacher, we’re not talkin’ rocket science here.” I would say, “You’re right! We’re talking about something more complicated than rocket science when we talk about faith. When we talk about rocket science, we talk about brilliant men and women who invent rockets. When we talk about faith, we are talking about the One who *invented* the scientists. And when we talk about human relationships, especially when it comes to forgiveness, is there anything more complicated and more that we need to hear, especially in the church, because often in the church we are charter members of the “Pour Oil on Water Society.” We will avoid conflict at any cost because we’ve seen it happen and we know how painful it can be, especially in the church. We’ve seen church fights, and we will do whatever we can to avoid them, but we don’t realize that when we avoid them we often end up making them worse.

Some of you will recognize the name Bill Hybels. Bill Hybels is the senior minister at that megachurch, Willow Creek Community Church, outside of Chi-

cago. Bill Hybels said, “The mark of a great church is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of a reconciling spirit.” Do you see the difference? I believe when Jesus said, “When two or three are gathered in my name...” the “in my name” part is that when we are working toward reconciliation, Christ is present with us. It’s what Christ expects us to do in the church.

Let me give you an example of reconciliation, a woman by the name of Joy – that’s a neat name for the woman in this story. One time in a sermon I preached I was talking about nicknames. One of the examples I gave was a nickname people had for the superintendent of schools. Not only the students called him this nickname, but also teachers and, if the truth be known, even some of the board members. They called this superintendent “Little Hitler.” Need I say more? I mentioned that as one example of a nickname in that sermon.

Several weeks later Joy came into my office to talk to me. We visited for a while. It was obvious that she was upset about something. She told me she was upset about the story that I had shared in the sermon. Then she said, “You know, the superintendent is my uncle.” I thought, “Oh, great!” That happens in small communities - everyone is related. I apologized to Joy, even though I hadn’t said anything that was untrue. She accepted my apology. Several weeks later she came to see me again. She gave me a little stained glass dove that you can hang in the window, something that she had made as a symbol, I believe, that we were reconciled, that things were all right.

But what happens when things don’t work out? Look what Jesus said. If things don’t work out, you try again. If things still don’t work out, you try again. If things still don’t work out, you try again. This isn’t a story about excommunicating people from the church. This is a story about restoring people to the church.

I have a suggestion for how we could increase attendance dramatically. Once a month, or maybe once a quarter, we could have what’s called “Mediation Sunday.” We could let people bring their disagreements here to the church and come to the front of the church and share those disagreements. Don’t you think attendance would be up on those Sundays?

Imagine a woman coming; she wants us to kick her husband out of the church. “Harry was grillin’ burgers. He burned them the way he always does. When he gets through with them you can’t tell the difference between the hamburger patties and the charcoal. I think we need to kick him out of the church.” Then we’d vote, thumbs up or thumbs down. Then Harry says, “Mildred let us run out of coffee again. You know I have to have my coffee in the morning.

She let us run out. I think we need to vote her out of the church!"

How embarrassing to bring some of the petty, silly, childish arguments that we have! Think about some of the things that you fight about with your spouse or your children or your parents or other family members or friends. Would most of us not be embarrassed to bring those here in front of the church?

Peter, being the astute person that he is, figured out that there was something else going on here, so he asked the question, "Lord, how many times, then? If my brother sins against me, should I forgive him as many as seven times?" Peter knew the teaching of the rabbis. The rabbis said, "Forgive three times. If your brother sins against you, forgive him three times. Then, if he does not repent, it is as if he were dead to you." So Peter goes beyond the teaching of the rabbis.

We're a little uncertain about the answer of Jesus. We don't know if Jesus said "seventy-seven" or "seventy times seven." The point is you forgive till you lose count. That's complicated, folks. It's not easy to do. I said in the first service that I wished Bill Tabbernee had been here today because I am thankful for what our seminary does to educate men and women for ministry. It's not enough just to have someone come into the church with mud on their shoes and say, "Aw shucks, we need to get along with each other." It's more complicated than that.

I saw a bumper sticker on the back of a car recently. It was a two-part bumper sticker. Now, that's getting kind of complicated. On the one side it said, "God opposes no group." Then the second part of the bumper sticker said, "Only religions do that." Now, this guy had obviously had a bad experience in church somewhere, but think about what that bumper sticker is saying. "God opposes no group." That's not true! God opposes cults that abuse children. God opposes any group that denies rights to any person. So that part of the bumper sticker is wrong, but also it's wrong to say, "Only religions do that." All kinds of groups in society oppose other groups. It's more complicated than bumper sticker theology.

In a moment I'm going to tell you what might be my favorite story about forgiveness, but before I do I want you to know this. I know that there are some of you present here this morning who either need to forgive someone or need forgiveness from someone. That's how life works. Our common need is God's uncommon grace, all of us, but surely just as much we need to share that grace. Aren't you glad that you're a part of the church, something that is larger than you are by yourself? We are called to live in community. But aren't you glad also that you're a part of a church that says the church, all of the church, is

not more important than any one single member of the church. In the scripture just prior to the passage that I read today, Jesus tells Matthew's version of the 99 sheep and going out to look for the lost sheep, and leaving the 99 because *every person* is important.

Now then, the story about forgiveness, and it's also a story about God. But it's also a story about us because we have been created in God's image. Are any of you familiar with a place called Ayers Rock? Have you seen pictures of that before, or maybe some of you have even seen it in person. That's another reason I wish Bill Tabbernee were here. Ayers Rock is that huge rock formation that we see in movies and other television programs that's in the desert in Australia. It's over a thousand feet high and over eight miles around. There is this wonderful legend about Ayers Rock. One day a dove flew by Ayers Rock. As she flew by, the very tip of her wing barely grazed the rock. A million years later, she flew by the rock and the same thing happened. Just the tip of her wing brushed against the rock. A million years later, the same thing happened again. When the tip of that dove's wing brushes against Ayers Rock enough to make it level with the ground, that's when God will stop forgiving us.

That's Good News, folks. That's about as good as it gets. But it's not just a story about God's forgiveness. We who have been created in the image of a forgiving God are challenged to be as forgiving with each other. We're not talkin' rocket science here. We're talking something far more complicated, far more difficult, and far more important. Amen