

“Growing Pains”
Matthew 18:15-20
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When I was a boy, I grew up rather quickly. Literally. By the time I was in 6th grade I was six feet tall. But what this meant was that in my younger years I would often wake up in the middle of the night with great pains in my legs, especially right behind my knees. It was very painful and when I was very young, I would even cry, my dad often coming into my bedroom to comfort me. There wasn't much that he could do, but I always wanted him to come. Then one year we were visiting my grandparents at the farm over between Mason and Eaton Rapids and one night the pains started. My father came when I cried, but my grandmother came too. And when she came she pulled out some pink lotion and told my dad to massage it on the backs of my knees. So that's what my dad did until the pain went away. Now my grandmother was a Stanley dealer. She sold Stanley products to make a little extra money for the farm. Do you all know Stanley Home products? They sell cleaning products and brooms and toothpaste and personal care items. Now I don't know what this pink lotion was, but I asked my mom to make sure we took several bottles back to Colorado with us. And every year when Granny would send a box at Christmas, she was sure to include a bottle. And for years, whenever the night pains would start in my legs, my dad was there to massage them with that pink stuff.

Growing pains were the worst.

That's true not just with young boys but it is true with the Christian community also. In these passages from Matthew 18, Jesus talks about how to get along in the community of Christian brothers and sisters when one person feels wronged by another. You would think a community gathered around Christian principles would be easy, right? Especially with Jesus—the ultimate Shepherd—there to lead them. But like us, the disciples were human, that community probably had their favorites, and at times competing

ideas of who that leader should be.

It was sometimes ...political.

You might not know that the disciples, in the years after the death of Christ, had epic battles: who was really the more powerful disciple? Should the church be led by Peter? Or maybe Paul? Who did Jesus really like best? And among that early church community, one can only imagine that rumors, gossip, hurt feelings were present in the life of the community. If not, why would Jesus have prescribed a solution?¹

Because relationships are not easy. And as they grew, as we grow together in our spirituality and our discipleship, it is hard. Relationships take work.

I've been talking about a covenant community for a while now. The seeds for such an ideal community were planted in my brain a few years ago when I began to imagine what a special church this could be if everyone, from the staff to the Session to the whole congregation—everyone practiced healthy communication in covenant with one another. So I started by introducing this idea to the staff. We—as a staff—practice healthy communication intentionally and even have a staff covenant statement that we've written together. We are not perfect at it but we try and try again to live up to a common ideal and I believe we are healthier for it as we all get along quite well. I've also been introducing the concept to the Session and hoping that sometime in the next year we, too, can have a covenant agreement that guides us in how we treat one another. And eventually I hope we can have a congregational covenant, an agreement, so that everyone is a stakeholder in this concept of healthy communication, everyone can contribute to the ethos of this community. We can hold one another up

¹ For more information on the early church and conflict see *Jesus Wars* by Phillip Jenkins; *Christianity, The First Three Thousand Years* by Diarmaid MacCullouch.

in times of distress and—when necessary—hold one another accountable when we fail to be our better selves and engage rumors, criticize without understanding or even act deceptively or hurtfully toward another. Certainly the early church had problems and experienced its own growing pains. And maybe, for us, practicing the tenets of a covenant community can be like a balm, that pink lotion, that eases the discomfort as we work through *our* growing pains.

We have a community here in this church. But what do you want from this community? What do you want to happen here? We want to be loved, encouraged, cared about. We'd like to hear some music that we like, occasionally singing along. We'd like a pleasant, historic building of which we are proud, maybe more comfortable pews. We'd like to hear an interesting sermon, with a good story. We'd even like to learn something along the way. And we might even want to do some good in the lives of others, as long as it doesn't cost us too much. We want it to be easy. We want this to be a community that is *easy* for us to be a part of.

But that's not what this is, is it? This isn't just a place to *get* something. This is a covenant community. We made a covenant today, didn't we? We baptized a little one, welcomed her into the church and said that she was united with us in Christ's ministry of love and peace and justice. Because this is a place where we commit ourselves, all of ourselves, to the lordship of Jesus Christ and to one another in love. It's not easy. Covenant community is never easy. It's demanding. Love is always demanding, it demands the best we have. We made a covenant with Shannon and Jeremiah today to love and pray for them and Poppy and Abraham as they grow as a family. That's what we are doing, growing as a family and there can be growing pains. When we look around us we can see new tender growth in our church. Young families who need our care. Youth who need our encouragement. Changes going on around us that are not always easy. That not everyone always agrees with.

Jesus knows that and that's why he gives us the instructions that we read today. This is often called the **Rule of Christ**. But notice that this Rule of Christ is to care for the so-called *offender* and not necessarily the one who feels they have been offended against. The responsibility is not on the one who did wrong, but rather on the one who feels he or she has been hurt, to seek reconciliation with the offender. And the goal is not to shame someone or to have someone admit that they are wrong by ganging up on them, presenting compiled evidence to prove your point. It is not a court of law but rather a court of love. We have to court one another in love and seek reconciliation. The goal is the restoration of peace and unity not the restoration of your definition of justice.

You see Jesus knew that there would be conflict. That there would always be conflict. And if you believe you have been part of a church that hasn't experienced conflict, here or elsewhere, then you haven't looked close enough. In the centuries after Jesus's ascension, the church fought over who they believed Jesus was, over who they could pray to, over who should be their leader. And we haven't really stopped. All churches experience conflict. It's in our DNA. But that doesn't mean all churches are unhealthy. You see the health of a church is not measured by the presence of conflict but rather how the church engages one another during conflict. When the ethos of this church is strong in the assurance that we will act according to the covenant we have with one another, then, like conflict, a natural drive toward healing can also be part of our DNA. That is what I envision for this church, a natural drive toward healing.

But maybe the growing pains of the early church (or our own) aren't the only pains to consider. Sometimes it is painful to grow as individuals. Maybe Jesus prescribes this method of conflict resolution also for the individual who is carrying a grievance in their heart. Maybe Jesus cares not just for the peaceful unity of the church but for the spiritual and emotional maturity of its individuals. So often we read this passage with arrogance. We see ourselves as the person carrying the hurt or

complaint. We set-up our argument in terms of right and wrong and fortify ourselves with self-righteousness. And when this doesn't bring about a peaceful solution, we double down on our arrogance, maybe even our anger. We bring others and—surprise—our grievances are met with defensiveness, maybe even confusion. These other people—you imagine—are there to take *your* part and yet, once again, the desired result escapes us. And by the time we get to the last stage, we're disregarding our offender and likening them to a tax collector or a gentile. Someone we should dismiss, even despise.

How is this prescription—authored by Jesus—going so wrong?

The answer is simple. When we engage this prescription cloaked in our own ego, we rarely get what we are looking for. Remember Jesus wants to see his disciples pursue paths of peacemaking but when we engage the process while seduced by our own self-righteousness, peace eludes us.

So maybe we have it all wrong; maybe the growing pains come when we learn how to approach another in humility, shedding our own perceptions and being open to new information that takes in the perspective of another. This is painful, dispensing with our crutches, the rehearsed narratives we play over in our mind, and trusting that engaging another in honesty and openness may cause us to tell our story differently, we learn the parts that were wrong. And maybe bringing other people in is so they can help you—not act like your henchmen—but shore up the peacemaking when you once again succumb to anger. And if this prescription is meant to help *you* grow, then maybe the part about the other being as a tax collector or Gentile is a challenge to go sit with your transgressor, get to know him or her, break bread like Jesus did.

That is what Jesus is trying to get across to his disciples—when you have problems with one another,

be reconciled to each other and here is how. Speak to one another directly. Don't talk to someone *else* about your problem but approach your brother or sister openly, directly and honestly. And with compassion. And humility. Because if we go to each other in arrogance and self-righteousness, the chances of reconciliation are slim. And so we approach one another openly, ready to see another's point of view, even prepared to see that we might have a part in this, that conflict is so rarely one sided. And because we value the relationship and because we believe Jesus was serious about that "Love one another" stuff, we try. And if that doesn't work, we find someone we trust and take him or her with us so we can try again. We don't search out people in the parking lot who are bound to agree with us. The goal is to be restored in fellowship with each other, not to get folks on your side.

But this will not be easy. Sometimes it takes the whole church. There is no easy fix.

You know, thinking back on my childhood, it never occurred to me until years later that there was nothing magical about the pink lotion my grandmother gave to my dad for my growing pains. There was no exotic proprietary ingredient harvested from some rare flower found deep in the Brazilian rainforest. I'm sure it was a plain bottle of moisturizer, dyed pink to look exotic perhaps, but likely nothing more than glycerin, oil and water. What was important was that my dad came and spent time massaging my legs until the pain went away. The magic came not in something that was in the Stanley lotion, but the catalyst was in my dad, willing to get up in the middle of the night, rubbing my legs, attending to my pain and it was in me and my willingness to believe that healing was possible.

So, there is no magic pink stuff for the church to help us all get along. It takes simple hard work. It takes vulnerability. It requires us to "take off our shoes" like we said last week and be our true selves. It takes spending time together. It takes open, direct talk. Not talking *about* it to others who only encourage your anger and feed on the drama of division but, instead, reconciling yourself to the one

who has hurt you. It takes one loving person to another, facilitating the process, believing that healing is possible. That's what covenant community is all about.

That's what we are supposed to be, a ministry of reconciliation. That's what the Rule of Christ is for. And when that still doesn't work? What do we do then? Jesus says if you have taken all these steps, then let such a one be to you as a Gentile or a tax-collector. Too often the church has taken this as a license to shun or shame someone that we can't be reconciled to. But think about this. What did Jesus do with Gentiles and tax-collectors and other sinners? He loved them. He sat with them. What else can we conclude from this? That far from shunning them, Jesus commands us never to give up on them, never to stop reaching out in love to them, always to yearn for the day to come when grace may abound and what has been broken may be restored. For where two or three of us are gathered, whether we're always agreeing or not, Jesus is here with us.