

“Sacred Ground”
OpenDoor MCC
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“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 Parent in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

This week's passage is about broken relationship. It's about what to do when things fall apart between us. It's about how do we proceed when one of us is trying to kill the other one of us?

That's right. I said kill.

As much as we struggle with what to do when we have our disagreements about things like how you spoke to me super mean and it felt bad, as hard a time as we have with our conflicts about stuff like that time you didn't have my back and left me hanging when I really needed support, let alone how difficult it is for us to simply navigate All The Things like how I hate your driving and you still owe me money for lunch last week, we're not even just talking about any of that stuff today.

To be clear, I'm not minimizing those other things, but we need to also go way past that. Jesus is also talking about what do we do when one of us is trying to kill the other one of us.

I can't help myself, though. I have to pause for a history lesson. Jesus, of course, isn't talking about any of this, because these verses are talking about the church and Jesus didn't give a flying fig about the church. He didn't talk about the church. He didn't make parables about the church. He didn't send the church thank-you cards. The church stuff in the gospels came later, with its creeds and sacraments and definitions of consubstantiation and dispensational eschatology. (Which reminds me, ask me sometime about the joke I made up my own self about the difference between scatology and eschatology...) But whether or not Jesus saying these words is factual and whether or not it's historical, it's absolutely true, because Jesus did talk about broken relationship and people trying to kill each other and about community. So don't get too distracted by my historical Jesus Turrets.

I want us to be thinking about the big ways that we break one another and become broken as a people, but I also don't want us to go someplace where we think this is only about the “obvious” “hypocrites,” like folks who send awful, name-calling hateful emails that they forget are auto-signed “In love and blessing.” That happened once in Binghamton. The Jesus who talked about tending to the log in our own eyes isn't coddling us in our interpersonal conflicts. Jesus loves us, and Jesus wants us to dig deep. Jesus, again and again in the gospels, asks us to consider our own actions, our words, our stuff that makes healing or that breaks hearts. I think this Jesus would have us ask ourselves, What is your responsibility for this conflict? What is your responsibility to your adversary? Who are you going to be in this?

It seems like this passage is some kind of Best Practices manual or Standard Operating Procedures handbook for what to do when someone in the community is super bad. (History break number two, because, seriously, I can't help it and I don't want to try to stop: That is exactly what it is. The Matthew gospel took this passage from some kind of Jesus Manual in the Q source material.) It sounds like the Jesus Manual is saying that, when someone trespasses against you, go do some direct dealing with them. If that works, terrific. If not, bring along one or two people who can confirm everything you say to each other. If that works, congratulations. If not, rat them out to the church. And if that doesn't work, well then, you've done everything you can and they are being belligerent, so now it's okay to kick them out of the church and take them off the membership roll and let them be to you like an outsider Gentile enemy and an insider tax collector enemy.

Right? It seems very easy, very clear, very well-laid out in terms of a logical progression to larger and larger circles of accountability and authority until it is okay to give your bad church member person the boot. Right?

Probably not. I suspect not. We are talking about Jesus, after all. When's the last time Jesus kicked anyone out of anything? When's the last time Jesus brought Peter and Bartholomew along with him to confirm everything he was saying? If these words are from Jesus' mouth, whether his historical, first-century, food-eating, living and breathing mouth or his Matthew story mouth, it doesn't matter. If they are Jesus' words than they are not in any way about the proper protocol of steps to go through in order to kick someone out of community. Period. Jesus didn't kick people out of community. Think about it. with that exception of the Syro-Phoenician woman and maybe one other time, Jesus always was bringing people into community. Jesus was always including outsiders and sexual suspects and diseased people and so-called sinners.

Think about it. Jesus didn't even kick out Judas. Jesus sat down with Judas at the table and ate a whole meal with him. And didn't even call him names, just said someone here is going to betray me. Judas kicked his own self out, because he couldn't bear it. I don't think this Jesus story, this Jesus lesson, this Jesus manual is about how to hold "bad" people accountable to the community. I think it's about how to hold the community accountable to the people trying to destroy it. I think, as always when we're talking about Jesus, the lesson is about love, about retaining community, about bringing "bad" people in.

The verses just before this passage are about dropping everything, leaving the 99 sheep that are here and safe and who obeyed the rules and stayed inside the fences and were nice and good and going out immediately and staying out all night if necessary in all weather to find that one lost sheep. Even when that sheep got lost of its own choice willfully on purpose.

And the verses just after this passage are Peter asking Jesus if it's okay to forgive someone once, or maybe I guess seven times? And Jesus says, what? Jesus says, No. Jesus says, No, Dummy. Forgive them seven times forever. Forgive them seven times uncountable.

This isn't a story about kicking people out with care, giving people due process and representation and legal obligation and all Constitutional protections before kicking them out. This story, this lesson, this Jesus is about keeping people in.

Look at the first line, where it says if a member of the church... Guess what that word is in the Greek? Brother. Now you know that I know that "brother" doesn't come with any get out of jail free cards, and that we do not have to lie down for people who are trying to hurt us just because they're blood relations. *We* still get to be safe. We still absolutely deserve respect. God loves us, too, so much. And. Jesus

wants us to know that these people we are in conflict with, these people who are our adversary, these are our brother. Our kin. Part of us.

And Jesus says, When all else fails, when you've done everything you can and now they're just being jerks on purpose, he says, Treat your adversary like a tax collector and a Gentile.

You know where I'm going to go with that one, right? Treat your adversaries that refuse to listen or hear you or be chastened, treat your adversaries like tax collectors and Gentiles. Which of course means to invite yourself over for dinner, and make them part of your inner circle, and heal them and their families, and love them just like they are a brother. Which means to make sure they have food and shelter and community. Which means feed them when they didn't pack any food, feed them from your own lunchbox.

That's how we're supposed to treat the unrepentant ones, the ones the SOPs didn't work on.

When Betsy DeVos protects sexual assault abusers over survivors, when she takes us backwards ten years and victim blames and touts miscommunication and misunderstanding and leaves people vulnerable who are already targeted because they are vulnerable, unsupported, unbelievable in the first place, when she strips them of the most basic of protections... She is my brother. Jesus wants me to love her.

I'm pretty sure that Jesus also “wants” me to burn down the patriarchal system of sexual objectification and entitlement to women's bodies. But I'm to destroy the system. Not Betsy DeVos.

When Jesus said that all the vineyard workers will be treated the same and receive the same wage, it's not such a stretch to understand that all of us need to be brought under the protections of citizenship, of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness whether we are a model Dreamer student and employee, or an immigrant migrant farm worker, ... or a Mayflower refugee from political persecution. But I think it is clear today that Jesus also “wants” us to know that, even as Jeff Sessions strips away protections and help from harmless and innocent people, from children, he is our brother. Jesus wants me to love him.

Take to the streets and call your representatives and vote with your ballots and your dollars and kill those bills. Kill those bills. But kill those bills, not Jeff Sessions.

Jesus said all the vineyard workers deserve the same wage. He said all the debtors will be off the hook for their loans. He said all the soil gets seed, not just the good, black loam. He said all the sheep get to be found, not just the ones who stayed in the gate. He said everyone gets to come to the feast. Everyone is invited. Everyone is invited. Everyone...

All those parables that we understand to be social justice advocacy for the poor and immigrant and economically exploited and disenfranchised, all those parables really are for the immigrant, the widow, the people with HIV, people of color, trans women of color. And they are all also for our opponent, our adversary. Not just the ones who hurt us accidentally, or casually. And not even just the ones who are mean and mouthy on purpose to hurt us. But also the ones who are trying to kill us, trying to destroy fairness and kindness. Trying to rebrand fairness and kindness as weak.

Fairness and kindness isn't weak. Tear down the tables. Turn over the tables. Defy the rules. Protest publicly. And. Treat Betsy DeVos like she's your kin, like she's like you. Treat the people who hurt you at work, at home, treat Jeff Sessions the way you would treat someone you like or love. Treat them like

they are a part of you, as though their well being is tied to your own. Treat them like they aren't so different from you. Get it? Treat them like they aren't so different from you. Treat them as if you yourself have been known from time to time to act outside the strictest boundaries of love and generosity. Like you are them. Like you have been them. Like you might be them someday soon. Maybe later today.

And this is sacred ground. This is God. These are the "rules." Jesus said, Where two or three are gathered in my name. Where two or three are gathered in my nameSSSS. God's many holy names. This is where holy people walk.

This is the sacred ground that we keep trying to find with our feet. We keep trying to find it. Keep trying to find it.

Peace.