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## *Sermon*

**A sermon by the Rev. Buddy Crawford**

**Proper 18, Year A**

**Gospel: Mt. 18:15-20**

Last Sunday we reached a turning point in Matthew's gospel as Jesus announced to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Remember Peter's reaction to Jesus' declaration was that there must be another way - Jesus did not have to die. After sternly silencing Peter with "get behind me Satan", Jesus made it clear that his death was inevitable. Not only was death to be his lot, but being his disciple means taking up a cross and following Jesus' example. It is a difficult and challenging gospel message.

Today's reading from Matthew is just as challenging. In six short verses Jesus establishes the importance of Christian community and the need for its members to maintain healthy relationships. Even when the relationships are strained by another member's sins, Jesus asks that we make every effort to guard the community's unity. One way to understand what Jesus means by carrying our cross is in learning how to embody his words we just heard. To carry our cross means learning how to forgive, it means being part of a community that understands reconciliation to be a way of life, and it means seeing that relationships are more valuable than anger or retribution. More importantly, life in the church requires each of us to be willing to confront anyone who brings sin and grief and brokenness into the family of God.

It is in the work of keeping our relationships in tact that we are called to follow Jesus' example of unconditional love. After spending a year or longer in intimate contact with his disciples, Jesus knows something about the challenges of being in close community. When human beings come together we can begin to irritate one another, like when a pebble gets caught inside a shoe. If you don't stop and remove the stone you will be left limping or worse yet, wounding your foot. And so instead of letting sin irritate the community, we are to stop and confront the sinner to bring wholeness and restore peace to the church and to the world.

On a hot July evening in 1986 Steven McDonald, a New York City Policeman was on patrol in Central Park. Officer McDonald stopped three youth he suspected to have been involved in a robbery. While he was questioning them, the oldest boy, Shavad Jones, a fifteen-year-old, pulled out a gun and shot McDonald three times in the head and neck, one of the bullets shattering a vertebra. Steven's fellow officers reacted quickly, rushing him to the hospital. After three days in intensive care Steven learned that he would live, but it would be as a quadriplegic. Steven and Patti, his then-pregnant wife of only eight months, were told that the best thing would be to place him in an institution that could provide the level of care Steven would require. Patti began to cry uncontrollably - trapped in his body Steven could not even reach out to console her, and he cried too.

Patti was not willing to give up on her husband and send him away. Their priest and members of their parish prayed and helped out and their church became more and more important to them. People of faith reached out to them with love and support; Christians, Jews, and Muslims. During his eighteen months of rehab Steven realized that if he did not let go of the hatred and anger he felt towards Shavad Jones it would consume him and ruin any chance of happiness he might have. Over time he came to believe that it was God's love that was putting him back together and that forgiveness was part of that divine love. At his son's baptism he told everyone present that he forgave the teenager whose actions had forever changed his life. In making this declaration he was freeing himself from the negative, destructive emotions so that he could more

fully love his wife, and son, and community.

Confined to a wheelchair and forced to breathe through a breathing tube, Steven took on a new vocation, traveling to schools speaking about the need for forgiveness and for the practice of non-violence as an alternative to conflict and difficult problems. He shares his story and explains that he has not only forgiven Shavad, but that he has to forgive him every day as he struggles to cope with the pain of his massive afflictions. It is a forgiveness that is rooted in the reconciling, redeeming love of Jesus Christ.

A year or so after the incident Shavad Jones called the McDonald home to apologize to Steven, Patti, and Conner. Steven suggested that upon his release from prison that they might work together, sharing their stories of the tragedy of violence and the need for forgiveness and reconciliation. Shavad was released from prison after serving ten years, but three days after returning home he was killed in a motorcycle accident. Steven continues to tell their joint stories everywhere he goes and says that Shavad is always with him.

Conner was in the third grade when the motorcycle accident occurred. On finding out the news he went to his teacher and asked if they could pray for the man who had shot and crippled his father. We might think that Conner's request is remarkable. But I would like to think that it is a natural response for a child who has been raised in a household where reconciliation has been made a way of life.

While our reading from the NRSV translation of Matthew begins, "If another member of the church sins against you," the original Greek says, "If your brother sins against you,." In an attempt to be inclusive in language the NRSV forfeits the intimate character Jesus uses to describe the relationships we have as members of the church. If a member of your family has wronged you - go to him or her and try to restore the relationship - and don't give up after only one try. If meeting one on one doesn't bring about forgiveness, take someone with you, and if that doesn't work bring the matter to the whole family of the church.

Jesus continues with a troubling statement, that if the brother or sister does not listen they should be treated as a Gentile and tax collector. Our first reaction may be to interpret what he is saying as an act of exclusion. But I believe we must consider where Jesus' ministry has taken him. In all four gospels Jesus involves himself intimately with Gentiles and sinners of all sorts - breaking bread with them, healing their infirmities, and freeing them from whatever circumstances hold them in bondage. Jesus is not asking us today to exclude, but to go even further in bringing reconciliation to the sinner who is as close as a brother or sister.

Healthy family systems are used by God to teach us how to be together, to work together; they are where we learn to share, and to care and support each other. Families are also the places where we learn to fight - especially if we have brothers or sisters to practice on. Being the oldest of six siblings I can vouch for this from personal experience. The six of us argued and fought often, but we also learned how to make up. Often our parents were the first ones to confront us, insisting that we confront - that we come face to face - to say I'm sorry and to accept forgiveness. Have you ever noticed how quickly children can shift from arguing to reconciliation and return to playing together as if nothing has happened? Harboring no grudge or resentment, they simply let go of the past faults and move forward.

Steve McDonald did not have the ability to confront his assailant face to face. But he did confront his anger and bitterness and hatred by taking all the negative feelings he was harboring to God in prayer and participating in the sacraments. I have no idea if Steve was familiar with the words of Jesus we hear today. We do know that he did not wait for Shavad to reach out to him; he made the first move towards forgiveness for his own well-being.

That's the real challenge isn't it - that we act like Jesus did throughout his life, becoming humble enough to make the first move so that reconciliation will be the hallmark of the Christian community. The promise, the good news, is that when we do the hard work of maintaining our relationships, Jesus is right here in the midst of us. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be with them." AMEN.

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