



first human beings try to hide themselves with fig leaves from the gaze of the Lord, symbolizing their growing distance from the God who had once walked with them and talked with them in the cool of the evening.

But that distance doesn't keep God away. That's one of the reasons God sent his Son to come among us, as a flesh-and-blood human, to be with people face to face. Imagine the healing power present in the moment when Jesus looked Peter in the eye and said, "Peter, do you love me?" When he lovingly cupped in his hands the face of the woman caught in adultery and said, "Your sins are forgiven. Go and sin no more." When he healed the man born blind and the first thing the man saw was the face of Jesus looking at his own with eyes of love. When he appeared, face to face, with the women outside the tomb on that first Easter morning and said, "Do not be afraid."

And face-to-face encounters of Christians with Christ did not end when he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. One of Christ's gifts to us is the gift of community, where we meet Christ in our brothers and sisters - heart to heart, spirit to spirit, and face to face. Christian community is that place, that way of being, where we know, and are known by, the Love at the center of the community: a life-giving, sacrificial, persistent love that calls us to reach beyond ourselves, to realize how deeply we are connected, woven together into one body, the family of God. Joined in Christian community we can share grief and joy, defeat and victory, sadness and celebration. All of this makes Christian community a great gift.

But it's a gift we don't fully understand or accept. Living in community is hard. As that growing sector in our society, the spiritual-but-not-religious folks might put it, "Churches have too many people to deal with; I'd rather just be spiritual on my own."

But Jesus taught that faith is not a personal and private matter. Knowing Jesus, following Jesus is not something we can do individually. Our faith is not something we can go off and enjoy by ourselves all alone, sitting by a stream, walking in the woods, working in a garden. Now, don't get me wrong: those times of private devotion can most definitely feed and strengthen our faith, but our life in Christ can only happen when we are gathered together with other believers. Even just two or three form a community. And gathered in community - that's when Jesus said he would be with his disciples. Not when they are off alone and feeling privately spiritual.

But let's admit it: Isn't it easier sometimes to feel Spirit-filled when there is no one else around to distract us or muck things up? Life as Christians, living together in Christian community, is not always easy. We are humans, after all, and while we may have God as our grounding and guide, the almighty never-ending source of love, for whom nothing is impossible, we all will, at times, forget and fail and fall out of love – sometimes out of love with God, and much more often with each other.

That's why Jesus taught, and Matthew wrote this eighteenth chapter of his Gospel. It's about how to deal with the fact that we often fail at loving as fully as we should. What ought we to do, what would Jesus have us do, when someone in the community sins? When someone does something harmful to themselves, harmful to another, harmful and hurting to us, something that puts a distance between themselves and God, or between themselves and the community?

The first step is to go to them, face to face. Jesus instructs us: "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."

Jesus' teaching here is first and foremost about reconciliation, restoring a brother or sister to the life and full embrace of the community. It is not about pointing out someone's sin for the sake of pointing out sin, not about embarrassing or shaming them. It is not about making ourselves feel better or proving a point. It is all about regaining a brother or sister. It is all about living together as one family.

In some families, the illusion of harmony is more important than true harmony and togetherness and acceptance. Some families teach that confrontation is to be avoided at all costs. In some families, the way hurt is dealt with is to pretend nothing happened, sweep every conflict under the rug. In some families, harsh words, however truthful, are still forbidden; while silence, regardless of how false, is golden. If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all; and if there's a problem, keep it to yourself. Perhaps this describes your family. Perhaps this is how you were raised.

But Jesus' instruction for his family is very different. In the Christian household, when your brother or sister sins, you go talk with them in private. And if that doesn't work, step two is to go back again, taking other people along. And step three is to go back once again. Do everything in your power to bridge the distance and get your sister or brother back.

And what if the person does not listen, despite our repeated attempts? Then we are not to pretend that nothing has happened. If the person won't let go of the sin, let go of what's causing the harm, of what's endangering the person or the community, then we are to recognize that one of our members has left the family. We are not to ignore it, or cover it over, but to take notice and lament that one of our siblings is missing from the table. There is distance between us and we would be best to admit it, rather than pretend not to notice or let the issue fester in our midst like an untended wound.

Confrontation – even with the best of intentions – is difficult. So, this is a hard teaching. Straight forward enough, but hard to act on. Often, we prefer a love that is out of focus, filmed in soft light and hazy, not the sharply-focused holy love that takes action and risk and is willing to confront a brother or sister in Christ. Because, to confront someone, even confront them lovingly, is difficult, sometimes even terrifying and paralyzing.

It can be quite hard to go and speak plainly and directly. Which is why so many of us will often take the easy way out, using some of our more usual and unhealthy ways of dealing with conflict. You all know these ways . . . we've all used these ways at some time . . .

- The first: just pretend it didn't happen. Just let it go and get beyond it. Ignore it and maybe it will just disappear. But it is never really gone, so meanwhile, we are awkward around the person.
- A second strategy is the cold shoulder, avoidance. Don't say anything to the person; cross the street to avoid having to meet them.
- And there's a third strategy, one we might call the "revenge method". Never talk to the person about what really happened, but make sure everyone else around us knows our version of what happened, what was done or said, knows that person X is not to be trusted. Don't talk directly with the person. Instead, let your hurt and anger seep into everything you do and say, poison the air around you, and put more and more distance between you and the person who did you wrong.

Distance. That's the key word here. Community is about togetherness, realizing that we are all connected. Heaven is that place where nothing can come between us and God, between us and God's love for us. In contrast, hell is about distance.

C. S. Lewis, in his book, *The Great Divorce*, imagines hell as a vast gray city. It's a city inhabited only at its outer edges, with rows and rows of abandoned houses at the center; empty because everyone who once lived in them has quarreled with the neighbors and moved, and then fought with the new neighbors and moved again, leaving streets of empty houses behind them. That is how hell got so large, Lewis says. It's empty at the center and lived in only at the distant fringes because everyone in it chose distance instead of confrontation as the solution to wrongs done against one another.

In contrast, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, Jesus instructs us to confront one another. But how can that be?, we ask. To confront one another? Surely not, we say. "To confront", "confrontation": in our society it carries strong negative connotations, but the word – *CONFRONT* – the word really means "to bring people face to face" - front to front - to talk honestly and hear openly about what is actually going on between them. And this is precisely what Jesus recommends. It seems to be not only the best way – the Gospel way - to stop the spread of hell, but also the most faithful way of following Christ. Confrontation in search of reconciliation. Jesus says our relationships with each other are worth it. And he should know. He went to the cross, to take on our sins, rather than just cover them over, ignore them, pretend they don't matter. Jesus was willing to die so that we might be reconciled – to God, and to one another - so that we can confront one another, come together face to face, front to front in love. The Son of God lovingly sacrificed himself on the hard wood of the cross so we could be reconciled. So the least we can do is go, sit face to face, talk, listen . . . then go back some more, bring more faces, more ears . . . do all we can to let the person know they are so precious that we're not going to walk away and abandon them, not going to let them go easily.

But what about when people refuse to acknowledge their sins, acknowledge our hurt, refuse to change their ways, come back into the

house and rejoin us? What if their continued presence in the family would be harmful? Well, then, says Jesus, "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Yes, they should be treated as those who are on the outs, those who are outside the family.

But here's the twist: those on the outside, those on the margins are the very people Jesus made a special focus of his ministry. Indeed, Jesus was known as a friend of tax collectors and sinners. He continuously and repeatedly reached out to them with the message that the opportunity always exists for them to turn away from sin. Like the Prodigal Son, they can always mend their ways and come home, be welcomed back, and warmly received.

There is risk in meeting each other face to face. We might prefer to hide behind fig leaves or whatever is close at hand, rather than take the risks Jesus did. But the story of Jesus and his teaching shows us there is power and promise in meeting each other face to face, especially when we fall, when we fail, when we stumble or hurt. God, who knows every one of us, our weaknesses, our faults and failings, longs to draw us close to God and to one another. Christ promises that someday, we too will know the joy of seeing God face to face in paradise, stand before him front to front without fear or shame.

In the meantime, until that glorious day comes for each of us, we can turn face to face with our brothers and sisters in Christ, and there, in that con-*FRONT*-ation, we will meet Christ who promises to be present whenever two or three meet face to face, front to front in his name.

Amen.