

## Called to Community...Life Together

I grew up a long way from here. It's no surprise to note that there are many differences between the sand hills of western Nebraska and the swamplands of eastern Indiana: the landscape, the weather, the smells and sounds of the early morning and the color (and size) of the sky. There are prairie grasses in contrast to acres of hardwood trees, the color of the cattle and the culture of the people have striking differences! Before my move to Indiana, I hadn't had the experience of living in a community with a singular ethnic identity. I hadn't ever seen Amish folks before – in real life that is!

Of course, there are many outward differences easily noted between an Amish person and myself. But one that I find most fascinating could well be the most important distinction between us. It never fails to sound peculiar to me when a member of the Amish community offers words of introduction. Recently, an Amish family – a 30 something man and woman with a buggy filled with children – pulled into our driveway. We were outside in the barnyard and upon seeing us they brought the horse to a halt. After a few pleasantries, the man said, "I'm one of Joe A. Graber's boys. We bought the Schmidt farm down the road. We're going to be your neighbors." A storm cloud was on the horizon so soon the family continued down the road. How strange it seemed to us...the man had offered clear introduction, but hadn't ever given his name.

No doubt, we've all heard this kind of introduction from our Amish neighbors. For persons "belonging to the Amish," *community* is not an overtly chosen dynamic. Life in community is so intrinsic to personal identity that sharing one's own name is secondary to "first family" ties. In more nuanced ways this style of introduction also remains in the ethnic Swiss community. Among these folks, it's known as the "Mennonite Game."

Community life in our local setting – it may mean one thing to an Amish person, something else to folks of Swiss heritage and yet another to some of us from the great melting pot of 21<sup>st</sup> century USA. Yet, through the gifts of the Spirit we can experience a common community -life together as the body of Christ. We're here tonight as a new community – not simply as a group of folks sharing a common geographical location.

We are here as the Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship, each one of us in our own particular way experiencing a call to community, a call to life together as believers and followers in the way of Jesus. We bring a myriad of expectations and personal experiences. We bring hopes and dreams, hurts and disappointments. We bring what we believe to be our best selves. May we know that our less-than-best selves, our broken selves are also welcome. As Anabaptist followers, we believe that life together is central to being disciples of Jesus. This call to community is communion of the body of Christ—right here, right now, together! In our year together, we've savored the wonder and joy of God's presence guiding us. Already, we've faced a few hard questions. We have sought

God's leading and one another's counsel. No doubt, there will be more of both ahead! So it is with life together! All of this belongs to life in community! Tonight, we step alongside the first followers of Jesus to observe some of the challenges they were encountering as they sought to share life together – and do we ever! It seems that our worship service, this evening, was going along so nicely, so warmly...until Kyle came to read the text from the Gospel of Matthew! (Matt. 18:15-20) We find ourselves dropped right into the thick of things!

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone...” Yikes...suddenly the songs of praise and beautiful words about love become very personal and practical. This is a text that quickly makes for clammy palms – a frightful passage!

Let's step back a moment. What memories does this classic text for the practice of church discipline awaken within you? What feelings does it evoke? Why, I ask myself, was my first reaction upon discovering Matt. 18:15 as the gospel text for this Sunday one of “oh no! Why would I find it fitting to call this a “frightful passage?” These were gut reactions; not attempts to startle or sensationalize!

In order to give this text a chance let's back up to the beginning of the chapter. Referencing the beginning verses of chapter 18

**Power Alienates (Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?)**

- Let go of pretense and prestige

**Rigidity Suffocates (Woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes.)**

- Welcome authentic expression of self as found in the lives of children

**Everyone Counts (Not one should be lost.)**

- Pay attention to each other, keep in touch

As I've spent more time with the text I've begun to wonder...is church discipline really the proper “heading?” Many of our Bibles highlight it in this way. Our Confession of Faith refers to this passage under an article entitled “Discipline in the Church” Some of us may have disturbing memories of well-meaning (and perhaps some not-so-well-meaning) persons seizing this text as mandate to point out another's faults. What is its intent...is it to tend to an imperiled relationship or is it to simply pressure someone else into changing their thinking or behavior? – at least outwardly! Is it a way to seek greater understanding of one another or to keep the church “pure” from sinners and protect rigid doctrine. These instructions have been put into practice in all of these ways in the name of church discipline.

What if we would lay aside the heavy-duty term “church discipline?” What if we would describe these verses, instead, as tools useful for “community building?” What if we

could come to this text with invitation instead of dread? With hope instead of fear? But how? We may have generations of accounts to settle. We may have had prior experience with being silenced by someone whom we feel has “sinned against us.”

We may have been part of “ganging up” on someone only to discover later, that our motives were selfish.

A strange thing has taken place in the verses of chapter 18. We begin the chapter with a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. By the time we reach verse 15, however, we hear Jesus speaking to the “church.” How can this be...there wasn’t yet such an entity known as the church! This is what I would suggest...

- The beginning verses lead to this very practical word in the nurture of right relationship with one another. They offer vital groundwork for the practice that church members are invited to participate in. *We need* to see the disciples struggling with these issues.

**If these who were nearest to Jesus found challenge in dealing with power, no wonder the same is true for us. If these followers were tempted to pour inflexible molds that folks couldn’t fit into, no wonder we do the same ... If the disciples easily forgot about those slipping toward the edges, no wonder that the same is true for our communities of faith! We need the teachings of Jesus to call us to a new way of life together! Nothing else will do!**

- The question about “who’s the greatest,” the challenge not be “stumbling blocks” for one another and the poignant allegory of the shepherd’s persistent love for the *one* lost sheep prompt us to take stock of our **communal** condition. Is servant leadership at work or is raw power negotiating the next move on the congregational chess board? Are we using positions of influence to categorize and shame? Instead of a spirit of trust in God’s providence, have fear and anxiety so overtaken the body that rules have emerged that are rigid and relentless? Does everybody count or are some drifting away because they are invisible and deemed expendable? Do we chose to ignore their voices... because “it’s no big loss...”

As a community, we must continually attend to these insidious tendencies! As we risk sharing life together as Matthew 18 invites, then how welcome, how filled with possibility for restoration and renewal become the following instructions. When misunderstandings arise...as they will...do these things.

1. Go and speak frankly about your experience. Speak from the heart. Chose an appropriate time so that the other is not shamed and does not lose face. Be your best self...but it’s OK if your hands tremble!
2. If it is hard for the other to listen to you, go with a couple of others from the beloved community. Don’t go wielding power, instead make it clear

that the goal is continued community. Invite others who will bring out the best in both parties!

3. If it is still hard for the other person to listen, surround him/her with the entire congregation. – that is the LOVE of the entire congregation!
4. Even then...if that isn't enough... “let such a one be as a Gentile or tax collector to you....” (But remember how Jesus felt about Gentiles and tax collectors!
5. He continued to be engaged, sharing table fellowship and keeping an eye out for those who were “hanging around” on the edges of the crowds...or watching from afar.

- (Harriet Lehrer, *Dance of Connection*) “Back to the Sandbox.” Two adults observe two small children fighting, yet in no time they are back together at play. “How do children do that?” “It’s simple, they choose happiness over righteousness.”

I wonder, however...if in our communities of faith we **attend to issues of power, if we are flexible and welcoming of the God’s marvelous creative ways in fashioning humans, if we pay attention to one another’s hopes and dreams, hurts and disappointments...** I wonder how many times we’ll really have to use this “instruction booklet” for restoration that Jesus offers to us. I wonder, as we tend to our beloved community, if we may not find ourselves right down grateful for this encouragement to keep accounts current. No, this isn’t a “frightful text” we need to fear or to dread. As we become the vibrant body of Christ it offers us nurturing guidance as we share “life together!” Life together...yes, building up the body of Christ for the sake of the Kingdom!

- 
- (C.S. Lewis’ *Great Divorce*) part of his description of Hell... a great gray city, inhabited only at the outermost edges, because the people could never be at peace with their neighbors...they could only move further and further apart...

“God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ, and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as (irresistible) communities of grace, joy and peace so that God’s healing and hope flow through us to the world.”

### **Call to Communion**

- Where two or three are gathered...in the Spirit of Christ...he is present... Prompted by the Spirit we seek after the things of the Kingdom...As the travelers on the road to Emmaus recognized Jesus - the two of them...in the breaking of the bread...may we prepare ourselves for the Lord's Supper.

Words about Communion: From *Beliefs* by John Roth. Herald Press:

- Communion points to a profound reality of Christ's living presence in ourselves and in the gathered body of believers.
- Jesus begins the meal with a surprise...he washes their feet
- He reveals that the power of love is, paradoxically, revealed in a posture of vulnerability and weakness.
- "When you eat bread think of my body that is to suffer. When you drink wine, think of my blood that will be shed." The Lord's Supper is a collective act of remembering.
- When we eat the bread and drink the cup of communion, we remember that the power of God is revealed in vulnerability and weakness. We anticipate the possibility of suffering and we remind ourselves that the path Jesus calls us to follow may strip us of our security.
- From the *Didache*: Kernels of wheat must be ground into fine grain and merged with other kernels before they can serve their higher purpose and become bread. Grapes must be crushed and mingled with the juice of other grapes before they can become wine. Likewise, Christians must be prepared to relinquish their individual identity so that they might become part of the larger purpose of God's presence in the world.

The Bread of Life.....The Cup of Salvation.....in Jesus' name.