

“Being the Church”

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out that fault when the two of you are alone.” Has this happened to you? Have you ever needed to have a come to Jesus with someone, or perhaps worse, been on the receiving end of such a meeting?

I have. More than once.

But a particular time in seminary stands out in my mind. After worship one day, a classmate walked up to me and asked if he could have a word with me in private. So, we walked together out of earshot of everyone else and he asked a dreaded question.

“May I speak a truth to you in love?”

I had never heard this phrase, and said, “Come again?”

He said, “May I speak a truth to you in love. Can I talk to you about something difficult, with your trust that I mean it out of love?”

My stomach dropped and I could feel my cheeks getting red with embarrassment.

“Uh. I think so.”

He said to me, “You’re always late. To worship, to class, to meetings. You’re hardly ever on time.”

Not knowing what to expect from the serious introduction, I felt a little relieved.

I kind of laughed and said, “Yep. I am. Whoops.”

He said, “Well I think you should know, it’s noticed. It’s disruptive, and frankly, it’s pretty disrespectful.”

As quickly as it had faded, my embarrassment came back, only 10 times worse.

“What? I don’t mean to be disruptive or disrespectful. I try to come in quietly and sit in the back. I didn’t think anyone noticed.”

He said, “We do notice. And our professors do too.”

At this point in our conversation, I felt about an inch tall and wanted to disappear altogether. My colleague probably noticed and said, “I wanted you to know. I know you don’t mean any harm by it, which is why I’m telling you. When you’re late it makes it seem like you don’t care about class, about your classmates, our professors, or about what we’re doing here. And I know you don’t feel that way. But I wanted you to know how it comes across.”

I was embarrassed. I was angry, who was this guy anyway? Mr. perfect? Who was he to tell me I needed to shape up?! Truth be told, this guy was a stand up guy, one of the best students in school, and I'm sure, an awesome pastor now. But I was not thinking any of those things right then.

It wasn't until I talked to a close friend later, that he too agreed, there was no such thing as "sneaking into the back" or our actions going unnoticed *especially* in that atmosphere. Essentially someone from the church had pointed out my fault, and the ways in which I was sinning against my community, and when I didn't want to listen, another person from the community confirmed it.

Although I disliked the experience, I'm better for it.

I learned a valuable lesson that day- that as much as I had convinced myself that my actions, negative or positive didn't matter, I was wrong. What I did or didn't do not only mattered, it impacted the community whether I liked it or not, whether I wanted it to or not.

That's the thing about community. We're all in this together. And actions, even small or seemingly insignificant ones, can have a ripple effect that can greatly impact others. As the church, we have been called together to be the body of Christ. We are knit together in divine, profound, and irrevocable ways. And being the church, we see community and relationship magnified in our own worshipping communities. While there are many choices in church, even now- which Bible study to attend, which committee to serve, who we associate with outside of church, there is one choice we don't get to make- and that is who belongs.

It is likely there is someone within a congregation, and definitely someone in the church at large who we disagree with, who we may find fault with, or who may find fault in us. That is alright. It doesn't make us any less part of the church, and it doesn't make us any less called to be the church. And this good news- can be uncomfortable. That we are called to be the church with all of God's people, even the ones we don't get along with. Even with people we sin against, or with people we feel are sinning against us. But, we have the church to teach us how to work out our differences, how to support us when these differences become a problem, and how to continue to live as the body of Christ because of the mission we share.

Jesus doesn't tell us we won't sin against one another, nor does he tell us that when we do, we can just ignore each other. Instead he tells us that we are to work out the sin between us- on our own, and with the church. And when someone refuses to reconcile, Jesus says to regard them as a tax collector and a Gentile. As we know, Jesus associated and sought to love and extend his grace to even Gentiles and tax collectors. Which means Jesus is telling us that no one is outside the bounds of forgiveness, grace, and reconciliation. In other words, no one is off the hook. Our actions effect others, and others actions effect us, whether we like it or not, whether they're intended to or not.

Right now in our country we are seeing how some actions have ripple effects and how they are effecting others in big big ways. Right now we are called, as much as ever, to be the church. To look at our those we find fault with, and figure out how to keep living with them and working toward the mission we share. Working and living alongside each other despite our differences might be the easiest thing to do. We may be called to go further and do the uncomfortable work of going to a member of the church and pointing out how their actions are hurting another. Or we might be called to listen to someone tell us how we are sinning against someone we're called to love. The point is, we are called to speak, AND to hear the truth in love. Not with the confidence that we are right and the other is wrong, not with self righteous assurance, not with any intention other than reconciliation and grace at the heart of our words and actions. Being the church is as simple and complicated as loving our neighbor.

Hear Paul's words:

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*

I wonder where this world would be if, realizing everything we do and say does affect someone, we stopped and looked at every person in this world for who they are at their core. A beloved child of God. What would happen if we assumed each person *wants* to love their neighbor, but might go about it differently, or might have a narrow definition of "neighbor," or may have just accidentally missed the mark? How much easier would it be to listen, knowing a reproach is truly done out of love?

This week, when we see the news, when we are on social media, when we encounter a literal neighbor- let us see that person as Jesus does- beloved and worthy. And perhaps just as important, let us see ourselves as Jesus does- beloved, worthy, forgiven, redeemed, called, equipped and sent people of God. While we cannot gather as the church, let us **be** the church, and may our actions have far reaching effects that reflect the grace first given to us in Christ.