

Face to Face

September 7, 2008

(Pentecost 17 - Year A)

Matthew 18: 15-20

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Several years ago, our family lived in Alexandria, Virginia, so that I could attend the Virginia Theological Seminary.

While we lived in Alexandria, we lived in a townhouse complex called the Brookville Townhouses.

If you were a seminary student with a family, you most likely lived in Brookville.

Brookville does not look like many of the townhouses or condos that we have here in Texas.

Instead, the Brookville Townhouses more closely resemble the small row houses or the brownstones that you see on the East Coast.

Our townhouse was only 800 square feet, with one bathroom, one bathroom for four people.

Anyhow, when we moved there from Texas, our sons, Scott and John, were 10 and 7 years old.

Outside our back stoop was the playground for the whole townhouse complex.

It was on this playground that our sons learned how to welcome new kids to the neighborhood.

They learned to welcome new kids on the playground by asking them: "So, which one of your parents is going to be a priest, your mom or your dad?"

Our next door neighbors were from Erie, Pennsylvania.

Our neighbors were Adam, who was the dad who was going to be a priest, and his wife, Jane, and their two young daughters.

We lived so close to our next door neighbors, Adam and Jane, that we shared a front porch with them - and our back doors were only 10 feet apart from each other, at the most.

Now, our boys liked to play with sticks on the playground. And we could tell that this kind of boyish play made our neighbor, Jane, uncomfortable - because she would always swoop her children up whenever the boys were playing with sticks. However, our boys were playing with sticks because they were pretending to be Harry Potter, with the sticks being imaginary wands and magic broomsticks.

One day, we came home from work and from school to find that each and every one of the 310 townhouses in the Brookville townhouse complex had a letter scotch-taped to each front door. The letter was from the Brookville management. And the letter said this:

It has come to the attention of the Brookville Townhouse management that some hoodlums are terrorizing our children on the playground by using sticks as weapons. We ask that you carefully supervise your children to protect them from this dangerous situation.

Well, you should have seen the loon on Susan Fisher's face when she read this letter. She immediately stormed out of our front door, onto the porch that we shared with our next door neighbors, and she knocked on their door. When Jane opened the door, Susan held up the letter from the Brookville management and asked: "Jane, are you responsible for this letter that calls my children hoodlums?" Turning red-faced, Jane admitted that she had called the townhouse management to complain and ask that something be done.

Still fuming, Susan replied: "Jane, I thought that we were better friends than this. If you have a problem with my children's behavior, then I think that you should be able to tell me about it, face-to-face."

Jane began to cry and asked for forgiveness.

Susan and Jane then hugged, as they began the process of reconciliation.

And from that day on, Susan and Jane came to a neighborly agreement. If Susan thought that Jane's children were misbehaving, then she would tell Jane.

And if Jane thought that our children were misbehaving, then she would tell us, face to face.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says:

“If another member of the community sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.”

In this scripture, Jesus is teaching us about how we are to live with each other, about how we are to live with each other in community.

In methodical steps, Jesus teaches us how to handle those times when we have a disagreement or a problem with someone else:

First, Jesus says that if you have a problem with someone, you need to have a conversation with the other person alone, face to face.

Second, if that doesn't work, then you are to bring a third party into the conversation.

Then, if that doesn't work, then you are to bring the entire community into the conversation.

Finally, Jesus says that if one on one, if adding a third party, if adding the community to the face to face encounter doesn't work,

Then, our last option is to treat them like a Gentile or a tax collector.

Since the Gospel writers all tell us that Jesus always gives *extra grace* to Gentiles and tax collectors,

Then, I believe that Jesus always wants us to go to *extra* lengths to reconcile with our brother or our sister.

However, the key is that our efforts at reconciliation *must* occur face to face.

E-mail is certainly a great way to communicate information.

When I served at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Houston, the rector there had a good rule about e-mail.

Her rule was that e-mail should only be used to communicate facts and information, but e-mail should never be used to communicate opinions or emotions.

E-mail is for telling your boss the time of the board meeting.
But e-mail is *not* for telling your boss that the meeting was boring.
E-mail is for giving your buddy the directions for the hike.
But e-mail is *not* for telling your buddy to take a hike.

For Jesus says that rather than use our computer mouse to “reply to all,” we need to see the whites of each other’s eyes.
Jesus says that rather than draft a complaint letter to go out to every resident of the Brookville Townhouses, we need to step next door and talk to our neighbor, face to face.

For, when God wanted to communicate God’s love for us,
God did not send us a text message.
God did not spread a rumor.
God did not write a letter to the editor.

To communicate God’s love for us,
God was born of a human mother,
To live and die as one of us,
To move in next door to us,
To knock on our door and to talk with us, face to face.

In the Gospel of John, the writer of John says that:
“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”¹

Jesus, the Word of God, has become flesh and moved in next door to us,
to share our front porch, to be there when two or more people disagree.

For Jesus is always there when two or more neighbors ask for forgiveness - and are reconciled to each other.
Jesus is always there, whenever we gather, face to face.

¹ John 1:14

Therefore, we gather on this Homecoming Sunday to hear the teaching
of Jesus that we should always go to extra lengths
To reconcile with our ex-wife,
To reconcile with our long-lost friend,
To reconcile with our estranged father,
To reconcile with our wayward daughter -
Forgiving each other, face to face.

For now, we see God only through a glass, darkly.
But one day, we will see God...face to face.²

AMEN.

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² See 1 Corinthians 13:12