

Matthew 18:15-20

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if he refuses to listen to them, and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. In the name of Jesus we pray.

Seventh Step to Inner Freedom: Be Honest about yourself.
(from 'The Way to Inner Freedom' by Joan Chittister)

This step to inner freedom means you can stop judging others, and really begin to hear the caring and insightful criticism of others, because you have finally admitted to yourself both your highest potential and your greatest weakness. Once you recognize to what depths you are capable of sliding, you stop defending yourself from other people's criticism of you, and you stop blaming everybody else for what you have surely done. Gone is the defensiveness that has cemented you in the unwillingness to change. In this acceptance of your own meager virtues and your own massive failures, you have the chance to understand the failures of others. You have the opportunity to become kind. The seventh step to freedom asks you to accept the idea that you have plenty of room for growth. It opens you to new possibilities within yourself. You can stop saying, "Well too bad, that's just the way I am," and begin to say, "There is more that I can be." This step to freedom gives you a new perspective on life, opens your eyes to the good in the world, and makes hope ageless.

"Compassionate Listening"

By the time Matthew had written his gospel account in 80 A.D. for his post-Easter church, fellowship in Christ had broken down. They had begun laying the groundwork for building the reputation that the renowned evangelist, Charles Swindoll said that church has built for itself. **The church is the only outfit I know of that shoots it's wounded** (Encyc. Of Humor, p. 27). In Matthew's church, the disease of self-importance and lording over one another had infected people, causing them to repeatedly offend one another. A spirit of alienation rather than communion had taken over the fellowship. Instead of people dropping in to experience the extraordinary way in which Christians loved one another, believers were dropping out. The litany of reasons may have been similar to the ones we hear today. Martha hurt my feelings, Paul offended me by asking for money, Eric always insists on being the boss, the pastor recognized Tom's good deed and not mine, Sam used me, Sarah lied to me, Dan turned his back on me, Angelina put me down, Hope wasn't there when I needed her. It's like Billy Sunday once quipped: **Going to church doesn't make anybody a Christian any more than taking a wheelbarrow into a garage makes it an automobile** (Ency. p. 27).

Church members are not immune to breaking relationships. We would be if we left our fearful hearts, wounded ego's, and learned way of dealing with hurt and anger on the front steps of the church when we enter---but we don't. Instead we bring all our unhealthy patterns of relationship making into our fellowship. This would be very discouraging news if it weren't for the fact that the sole reason we come to church is to be transformed by Jesus' countercultural way of loving God, others, and ourselves. Our (covenantal) life (in community) together, explained Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor is the chief means God has chosen for being with us, and it is of ultimate importance to God. Our life together is the place where we are comforted, confronted, tested, and redeemed by God through one another. It is the place where we come to know God or flee from God's presence, depending upon how we come to know or flee from another (Seeds of Heaven, Family Feuds, p.89).

We come to church to correct our misunderstanding and to practice Holy Love. **if he listens to you, you have won your brother over.**

Matthew 18:15-20 is a dynamic snapshot of Jesus' teaching on how to heal and restore relationships of Love in Christian community. Because Jesus used the word LISTEN five times in his teaching, the verb is a good starting place for reflection. Why are Love and Listen linked?

Nobel Peace Prize recipient and Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, helps us understand the importance of listening with heart in his reflection, *"Deep Compassionate Listening."* Deep listening is a meditation practice that can bring many miracles of healing. Think of a person with difficulties and suffering in his heart which no one has been able to listen to or understand. We can be the bodhisattva, the person animated by great compassion for all beings, who sits and listens deeply in order to relieve the suffering of that person. We should use our mindfulness to remind ourselves that when we offer someone our practice of deep listening, we do it with the sole aim of helping them empty their heart and release their pain. When we can stay focused on that aim, we can continue to listen deeply, even when the other person's speech may contain a lot of wrong perceptions, bitterness, sarcasm judgment, and accusation. Listening deeply with all of our heart, with all our loving-kindness and compassion, we don't get irritated by anything the other person says. We say to ourselves: "Poor him, he has a lot of wrong perceptions, he's burning up with rage and hurt." We keep listening; and then later on, when a good opportunity presents itself, we can provide the other person with more accurate information to help him see the reality more clearly. Anger and suffering are born from wrong perceptions; when we can get a more accurate picture of reality, the black cloud of anger and suffering dissolves. Knowing this, we can sit calmly and continue listening attentively. We allow the other person to say everything that's on her mind; we encourage her to pour everything out, and we don't interrupt her or try to correct her in that moment. One hour of deep listening like this can reduce the other person's suffering a great deal, and help her feel much lighter. Patience is one of the marks of true love. We should wait and find the right moment later on to begin offering some information that will help the other person correct her wrong perceptions. And we don't try to give the information all at once, because she may not be able

to digest all that in one big chunk, and might reject it entirely. We should offer the information in measured doses, small enough that she can take them in and eventually be released from the grip of all those wrong perceptions. Listening non-judgmentally also gives us an opportunity to discover and correct our own wrong perceptions, and when this happens, we can apologize to the other person straightway (p. 104).

Healing and restoring relationships by practicing the art of listening is the Reconciling Spirit's way of re-uniting grudge holding, lonely souls. On paper it sounds easy. In reality, it is difficult. Many obstacles keep us from listening with heart. One thing that often block us lies in Matthew's opening verse: **"if a brother sins against you, go and show him** Here the burden of responsibility for initiating a heart to heart talk is on the offended one. This requirement is both counter-cultural and counter-intuitive. Most often, when we have been offended, we tend to think that the one who hurt us should come groveling back and make the first move. The groveling that we expect, of course, gives us the illusion of power of being one up and the assurance that we will not be hurt again. According to Matthew's model for healing and restoring relationships: *The offended are to take the initiative. There is no room in the teaching of Jesus or in the conduct of the Christian life for sitting around, licking wounds, and sighing, 'poor me.'* *One cannot always avoid being a victim, but one can avoid the victim mentality.* (Interpreters Commentary)

At first glance, this requirement of the offended victim to take the first step toward reconciliation seems all wrong. But when we think about it, it makes sense . . . for when we are offended, we are the only one who knows for sure that we have been hurt. But how are we to keep ourselves from succumbing to a victim mentality? How do we muster up the courage to talk to the person who hurt us without fear of being hurt again? Perhaps the answer lies in Matthew's closing statement about the Presence of Christ in the church body. Take heart, keep the faith. Jesus said:

**For where two or three are gathered together in my name,
there am I with them.** Mt. 18:20