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Sermon for Sunday, September 4, 2011

Sermon Texts: Ezekiel 33: 7-11
Psalm 149
Matthew 18: 15-20
Romans 12: 9-18

Sermon Title: "To Correct or Not to Correct"

Sermon Topic: Scriptural correction of a brother or sister

Sermon Purpose: To teach the true nature of biblical correction and how Jesus taught us to use such discipline spartanly and wisely.

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Sermon Prayer: Heavenly Father, by Your Holy Spirit open my mouth to bring forth your words and our hearts to receive your message. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Have you ever noticed the minute you start doing something to improve your condition, you hit a roadblock of some type? For example: you start taking your walks to improve your health, and suddenly the weather changes and you can't. You begin taking vitamins to strengthen your joints and, after a few days, you sprain your ankle, separate a knuckle, or break a finger. You decide to start eating healthier and suddenly, you're invited to three parties in two weeks. You begin saving for a special family occasion, and you suddenly have some rather large unexpected bills. You start a new program at the church, at school, or at work, and obstacles start blocking what previously looked like a clear path.

The scriptures remind us that the powers of the world and the powers of heaven are always at odds. Whenever we begin doing something we **should** be doing, according to Scripture, there are always the forces of evil and the temptations of the world that attack us. We have to recognize that fact as we plan for things that lie ahead in our ministry together.

We at LPC are beginning a new program year in our ministry as we strive to transform our congregation from one that has **seen** its prime into one that is strong and growing. As we begin that process, we need to be aware that there are those forces that would lull us into complacency, create distraction or dissention within the congregation, and prevent us from being a vital Christian witness. Some of the opposition will come from the **outside**, from the community around us. Some of it, I'm sad to say, will come from **within** our membership. This internal opposition will give us the most heartache. What happens when we have to address a problem like this?

Today's Gospel Lesson tackles what **has** to be the most **challenging** issues in human relationships: "What to do when someone commits a wrong against you."

What do you **do**? What **should** you do? What **works**?

Some may claim it's all very simple. All we need to do is follow the advice of this morning's Gospel Lesson: privately tell the people to shape up. If they refuse to listen, get one or two other people on your side. And, if **that** doesn't work, then go ahead and **blast their reputation all over town!** It would **seem** that's what Jesus has to say. But, Jesus is providing more of a **challenge** and a **direction** than simply teach a course in correction.



It's very easy to fall into the trap of using Scripture to justify almost **anything** we want to do. But the same Jesus, who said these words about **correcting** another person, had **other** things to say about the same topic. He warned that we should not **dare** to go after the **splinter** in someone **else's** eye while we have a **log** sticking out of our own. Instead, He tells us first to remove the log that blocks **our** vision. In another place, Jesus suggests that only those **without** sin are in a position to cast stones. (Well, if the truth be known that disqualifies **all** of **us**, doesn't it?)

At best, this is only **part** of the point. The words we just heard are about **correcting**. They're **not** about **throwing stones**. There's a big difference between the two. There are **lots** of stones thrown in the name of **correction**. How often have we **insisted** that what we are saying (or doing) is for someone else's good when, in reality, we're doing little more than throwing stones in the very way Jesus warned **against**? Our so-called "concern for another's good" may be little more than a thinly veiled attempt to vent our anger.

Most stone-throwers don't see themselves as actually throwing stones. To some degree, they justify their comments around such phrases as "my rights" or their need to "teach someone a lesson." In **reality**, they're experiencing a need to "strike out," "to get even," or just to make some noise and be noticed. Jesus says, "Let those **without** sin cast the first stone."

Part of our problem is that the logs He speaks about very definitely block our vision. What appears to be our "good intentions" are often no more than a need to **manipulate** or to **bully** another person into **our** way of doing things, a need to "tell someone off," or an attempt to **justify** breaking off a relationship. But that log of pride, or of hurt, or of stored up hostility prevents us from seeing **our** actions for what they **truly** are. And so, we tell someone off and **content** ourselves with the **illusion** that we are simply doing what we're **supposed** to be doing; simply correcting according to what we read in Matthew's Gospel.

The Message of the Gospel

It's easy to use Scripture in ways they were never intended. Even as we heard it read, today, we may have envisioned certain people we feel to be in need of correction. We may even feel that we've been **chosen** by some special divine selection process to **do** the correcting. We could just **picture** ourselves telling this person or that person they had better **change their ways**, or we would get on the phone and "get the word out" about them. It may even make us **feel good**, just **thinking** about such possibilities. But remember this: that good feeling may just sound the alarm in our God-given conscience that what we're about to do is **not** what Jesus was talking about.

Given the **entire** message of the Gospel (**including** the call for mercy, acceptance, forgiveness, and a non-judgmental way of dealing with people), we can hardly look at today's lesson in isolation. Today's lesson is only **6** verses out of **35** verses in chapter 18 of Matthew; about one-sixth of it. The **entire** chapter speaks about how people – joined into a community of faith – should behave in regard to one another. It speaks **against** the kind of ambition that fosters **jealousy**. It advises us to become as little children. It warns against the scandal of leading others to sin. It talks about reaching out to those who are **lost** to the community. Jesus' discourse ends with a warning about how **important** it is to **pray** together. It's within this discussion that we find the advice on correcting each other.

The model presented here provides a real challenge for anyone interested in building the kind of community the gospel presents. The issue is not one of vindicating personal rights. Rather, it's the struggle of men and women to **relate** to each other in a way that forms and preserves a community that reflects Jesus. This is what we claim to be by the very fact that we gather here today: a people who reflect Jesus. It's within this framework that we need to understand the words we hear today.

Going Privately to the Offending Person

For starters, we've been told to first speak to the person **privately**. Already, we're pointed in a different direction than we may often be inclined to go. It seems easier to complain to a third party – or sometimes even to a fourth or a fifth. We usually get on the phone, email someone, or get someone in a corner at a party and we begin to talk. I've even heard of people lambasting someone on Facebook! Somehow other people and their faults provide popular conversation. (Actually, it's called "gossip.")

It may be the offending person is oblivious to the fact that he/she even **did** anything that hurt



you. That person's behavior is unlikely to change because you complained to someone **else**. Even if that person is aware of the hurt, "blabbing" it around the neighborhood isn't going to do much for the gospel's focus on growth of the community.

Yes, it's risky going to the offending person privately. Honest confrontation without personal attack is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of human relationship we have to learn. Some would say this ability separates the children from the adults – but many adults never learn it, either. For some, the risk may be too great. What if this attempt is thrown back in our face? What if I'm told to "mind my own business?" **What if that person doesn't like me anymore?** Any number of reasons lead us to complain to someone else rather than confront the problem where it is.

Even spouses often find it easier to complain about their partners to someone else rather than confront the situation with the husband or wife. They fear the repercussions and choose an avenue that is more likely to widen the gap between them than to heal the hurts.

Confronting the Situation

One technique of confronting a situation that's less likely to put the offending person on the defensive is to speak of it in terms of "I" language: in terms of your own feelings. Then, it's no longer a personal attack. "I feel left out and unimportant when you're gone so often." This type of comment is not as likely to bring the battle on as words like, "You don't care about me at all. You're never home!" "I feel very hurt when you say those kinds of things about me" is more likely to find a receptive listener than, "You don't appreciate anything I do!"

In short, sensitive and honest phrases will always win over more people than personal attacks and vindictive statements. When Jesus speaks of winning over your brother or sister, He's not implying **they** need to **lose**. Rather, His concern is that, even when one person hurts another, they can come together in forgiveness and a renewed concern for each other. Confrontations do not have to be win-lose situations. When they **are**, the result too often is a desire to put down rather than to build up, to correct, or to make better. Only **we** can judge our **own** motives, but if we have failed to heal – more often than not, we might take a look at what we are **really** trying to accomplish.

Consulting a Third Party

Even when the Gospel advises us to seek out one or two others after our attempt at private confrontation fails, it is not suggesting a "gossip fest." The intent seems to be to add some objectivity to the situations, since it appears to be hard to come by on one's own. Looking for advice or discreetly consulting a third party about a difficult situation is a far cry from the gossip and the catty remarks that so often follow personal hurts. Again, we need to look honestly at what we're about.

It may be that we are someone people naturally come to with their hurts or complaints. It may be that the one approaching us is doing so discreetly and with a real desire to bring about healing between him/herself and another. But, it may also be that this person is simply trying to find someone to **take sides**. It may be they are discussing something they have no right to be spreading. If this is the case, we stand challenged by the Gospel.

In such a situation, it may be that we are being called to provide a sensitive but honest correction. This correction may not be readily received, but that doesn't give us the freedom to encourage what fosters division. To do so flies in the face of **this** gospel **passage** as well as the **entire** gospel of Jesus Christ.

Some may object that we need to be supportive of our friends, and that such friends don't come looking for a sermon. They may also insist that what goes on between others is none of their business. Well, if it **isn't** our business, we **shouldn't** be willing to **listen** to it.

True support of our friends sometimes includes the need to challenge. If our support is nothing more than collusion, we aren't doing anybody any favors. As for the sermon objection, there are ways of making a point without preaching. Despite Cain's objection, there **are** times when we **are** called to be our brother's keeper – not out of some sense of superiority, but out of true concern.

The question is not so much whether or not we should correct, but rather **how** we do it and what motives we bring to our efforts. Praying over our approach would seem to be a necessary ingredient. But, how we respond to our own prayer and what it tells us is what's going to make the



difference – the kind of difference the gospel demands in communities that profess a Christian faith.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Creator, who calls upon us to make judgments with every breath; enable us, by your Holy Spirit, to be genuine in our concern for our brothers and sisters in the faith, and empower us to make loving correction wisely – without bitterness or division. Help us, Lord, to place restraints upon our own desires and to be concerned for the good of the community of faith. This we ask as children of God and heirs of Christ's ministry. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

