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 Proper 18a: Matthew 18:15-20
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Face to Face

Joe and I have just returned from a wonderful vacation in the Midwest. On our drive home, we stopped in Cleveland and visited the art museum there. Their collection is really quite wonderful and we got to see some great works of Christian art. We saw an amazing El Greco Crucifixion and a wonderful Holy Family by Poussin. But I have to say that one of my favorite pieces of Christian art will never grace the collection of a major museum, because it was made by a three year old. In a parish where I worked in seminary, the artwork of the Three Year Olds Sunday School class was displayed in the hallway. The subject of the pictures was Adam and Eve, after the snake and the apple incident. The teacher had given the young artists bay leaves to paste as fig leaves onto xeroxed outline drawings of Adam and Eve. All of the finished pictures looked pretty much the same, except for one. One child didn't use the bay leaves to cover the bodies of Adam and Eve. This child glued the leaves right over their faces.

And isn't that right? Isn't that what shame feels like? Once there was sin, there was a distance between Adam and Eve. It became harder for them to look each other in the eye, harder to meet face-to-face.

Today's gospel lesson is part of Jesus' teaching about our life together in community, how it is that we are to live and love within the Christian community, especially when things go wrong. And, because we are talking about human beings living in community, we can be fairly sure that things will go wrong. Our biblical story is quite realistic when it comes to the ability of human beings to get along. Even two people living in paradise can't seem to manage it very well. The effect of sin makes it hard not only for human beings to look each other in the eye, but also for them to

encounter God face-to-face. And, sure enough, as the story of the Old Testament unfolds, God makes fewer and fewer face-to-face appearances. Moses gets to see God, but the after-effects of that face-to-face encounter are too much for the Hebrew people to bear. It just becomes too hard, too painful for humans with our failings and flaws to look on the face of God and live.

But that distance doesn't keep God away. That's one of the reasons God came among us, as a flesh and blood human, to be with people face-to-face. Imagine the healing power present in the moment when Jesus looked Peter in the eye and said, "Peter, do you love me?" When he cupped in his hands the face of the woman caught in adultery and said, "Your sins are forgiven you. Go and sin no more." When he healed the man born blind and the first thing the man saw was the face of Jesus looking at his own with eyes of love. When he appeared face-to-face with the women outside the tomb on that first Easter morning and said, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

The face-to-face encounters of Christians with Jesus Christ were not to end when he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. One of Christ's gifts to us is the gift of community, where we meet our brothers and sisters heart to heart, spirit to spirit, and face to face. Christian community is that place, that way of being, where we know and are known by the Love at the center of the community, God, a life-giving, sacrificial, persistent love that calls us to reach beyond ourselves, to realize we are connected, woven together into one body, the family of God. Together, in Christian community we can share grief and joy, sorrow and victory, sadness and celebration. Christian community is a gift.

But it's a gift we don't fully accept. Living in community is hard. As that growing sector in our society, the "spiritual but not religious" folks might put it, "churches have too many people to deal with; we'd rather just be spiritual on our own." But Jesus taught that faith is not a private matter. Spirituality is not something we do individually. Our faith is not something we can go off and enjoy by ourselves all alone, sitting by a stream or walking in the woods. Those things and times of private devotion can feed our faith, but our life in Christ happens when we are gathered together, even just two or three together. That's when Jesus said he would be with his disciples. Not when they are off alone and feeling holy.

Isn't it easier sometimes to feel holy when there is no one else around? Life, as Christians, living together in a Christian community is not always easy. We are humans after all, and while we may have God as our Ground and Guide, the Almighty never-ending source of love, for Whom nothing is impossible, we forget and fail and fall out of love with God and each other.

That's why Jesus taught and Matthew wrote this eighteenth chapter of the gospel. It's about how to deal with the fact that we fail. What ought we do, what would Christ have us do, when someone in the community sins? When someone does something harmful to themselves, harmful to another, something that puts a distance between themselves and God, or between themselves and the community?

The first step is to go to them, face to face. Jesus says, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one."

Jesus' teaching here is first about reconciliation, restoration of a brother or sister to the community. It is not about pointing out sin for the sake of pointing out sin. It is not about making us feel better or proving a point. It is about regaining a brother or sister. It is about living together as one family.

In some families, the illusion of harmony is more important than anything else. In some families confrontation is to be avoided at all costs. In some families the way hurt is dealt with is to pretend nothing happened, sweep it under the rug. In some families, silence is golden. If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all, and if there's a problem, keep it to yourself.

Jesus' instruction for his family is very different. In the Christian household, when your brother sins, you go talk with him in private. And if that doesn't work, step two is to keep going back, taking other people along the next time, and step three is go back again. Do everything in your power to get your sister back.

If the person does not listen over and over again, then we are not to pretend that nothing has happened. If the person won't let go of the sin, of

what's causing the harm, of what's endangering the person or the community, then we are to recognize that one of our members has left the family. We are to notice and lament that our brother or sister is missing from the table. There is distance between us and we best admit it, rather than pretend not to notice or let that person fester in our midst like an untended wound.

Hard teaching, right? Straight forward enough, but hard to act on, right? Often we prefer a love that is out of focus, filmed in soft light and hazy, not the holy love that takes action and risk and is willing to confront, in love, a brother or sister in Christ. And to confront someone, even in love, is scary. John Wesley realized the risk involved when he used today's text when members of his parish were gossiping, complaining about one another behind each other's backs. He said of this first step of going privately to speak directly to someone, to confront them about their behavior, "do not avoid it so as to 'shun the cross.'" The Cross! That's how hard it might feel to go speak directly, rather than taking the easy way out, using some of our more usual ways of dealing with conflict. You know those ways: Pretend it didn't happen, try to just let it go. Meanwhile, be awkward around the person. A second strategy is the cold shoulder, avoidance. Don't say anything to the person, but cross the street to avoid having to meet them. There's a third strategy called revenge. Never talk about what really happened, but make sure everyone knows somehow that person X is not to be trusted. Don't talk directly with the person, but let your hurt and anger seep into everything you do and say, poison the air around you, and put more and more distance between you and the person who did wrong.

Distance. That's the key word here, isn't it? Community is about togetherness, realizing that we are all connected. Heaven is that place where nothing can come between us and God, between us and God's love for us. Hell is about distance. Randy Hyde summarizes C. S. Lewis's description of hell in this way. Lewis, in his book, *The Great Divorce*, imagines hell as a vast gray city. It's a city inhabited only at its outer edges with rows and rows of empty houses in the middle, empty because everyone who once lived in them has quarreled with the neighbors and moved, and then fought with the new neighbors and moved again, leaving streets of empty houses behind them. That is how hell got so large, Lewis says. It's empty at the center and lived in only at the distant fringes because everyone in it chose distance instead of confrontation as the solution to wrongs done against one another.

We're back to that word: confrontation. It sounds scary, but it really means bringing people face to face, front to front, to talk and hear about what is going on between them. And this is just what Jesus recommends. It seems to be not only the best way to stop the spread of hell, but also the best way of following Christ. Jesus says our relationships with each other are worth it. And he should know. He went to the cross, to take on our sins, to wrestle them away from us, rather than say they don't matter. He was willing to die and even come back so that we might be reconciled, so that we can come together face to face. So the least we can do is go, sit face to face, talk, listen, go back some more, bring more faces, let the person know they are so precious, we're not letting them go easily.

What about when someone refuses to acknowledge their sin, change their ways, come back into the house? What if their continued presence in the family would be harmful? Well, then, says Jesus, "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Yes, they should be treated as those who are on the outs, those who are outside the family. And here's the twist: those are the very people Jesus made a special focus of his ministry. He reached out to them with the message that they could turn away from sin, they could come home. Indeed, Jesus was known as a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

There is risk in meeting each other face to face. We might prefer to hide behind fig leaves or whatever is close at hand, rather than take the risks Jesus did. But the story of Jesus and his teaching shows us there is power and promise in meeting each other face to face, especially when we fall, when we fail, when we stumble or hurt. God, who knows every one of us, our weaknesses, our faults and failings, longs to draw us close to God and one another. Someday, maybe, we will even know the joy of seeing God face to face, without fear or shame. In the meantime, we can turn face to face with our brothers and sisters in Christ, and meet Christ who promises to be present when we meet face to face in his name.

Amen.