

## Getting Vulnerable

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Today's scripture feels a bit like a therapy session for the church. So often we're talking about the outside world or what's going on out there and how we can help or be or work on it. But today, it's time for a little church therapy. Time to relax, take a moment, and look inside ourselves and our own self awareness.

It's time to look at our behavior and see our messy spots and, instead of running from them, to walk or maybe stumble toward them with one another.

Church discipline isn't fun. Discipline isn't fun. I've never heard someone say that that's joined a church. But maybe it might be why some people have stayed. Or why people have left.

Reconciliation isn't something many of us are good at. I think it's because many of us think that reconciliation is the first step towards being back "good" with each other when it's not. Reconciliation is the last step, the end point, the goal. And when we jump there—we skip past the therapy session, the working together, the place where we actually build our trust.

I don't know about you—but I think, like many of us good Presbyterians, I'm a fixer. I see something wrong, I see someone hurt, I see something out of place, and my first instinct is to jump into action. To do something about it—and to do something about it NOW.

And I think Matthew 18 has some words for us fixers—they tell us to pump our brakes. To stop that impulse. At each and every step that Matthew teaches, he centers reconciliation around listening.

Because I think sometimes in our church full of fixers we run around fixing symptoms to the problems. We work on the side affects instead of the core. Because we aren't listening.

I'm sure you've been in a situation like that before. Micah and I are both pretty heart people—some people call it sensitive—I like heart people. And even with each other, one of us will be dealing with frustrations around an issue and I'll say "oh you should just do this" or "if I were you, I would have said this..." when really the person just needed us to listen. And if we did feel compelled to speak, just say, "wow. What a tough situation. I think you're doing best with what you've been handed."

Matthew 18 grounds every step of reconciliation in listening. Listening to ourselves, listening to the conflict, listening to the child of god we're in need of reconciliation with, and listening to God, the small still voice inside of us all, guiding us always towards community.

Because if we're in true community, there's going to be conflict. I don't want to talk down large, stadium style churches. So many people have begun their relationship with Christ at them. But I'll have to admit—I think it's really easy to be a part of a "community" like that. No one has an assigned pew there that their great great grandma purchased and dedicated to the church. You can come into those spaces, spend years at them even, and never have a real two way conversation. They're passive experiences. It's easy to hide in a community like that. (There are pros to this for seekers who have been hurt by the church, and boy do we mainline churches have our own issues.)

You can't really hide at Westminster. Once you walk through those doors, you probably have about two weeks before you're invited to an inquirers class. Once someone finds out you're handy, you're on our buildings and grounds. Oh, you're a former teacher? We need Sunday school volunteers. You've worked for a non profit before? We have a racial justice committee we could really use you on.

True community takes vulnerability. It takes risks. You can't hide. And, with those closer quarters, conflicts will come. Whether intentional or not, they are here. In fact, I'll bet most start as misunderstandings more than anything.

And we have a couple of options of how to deal with them, but they can all be boiled down to two true choices: we can work toward reconciliation or take our ball and go home.

Reconciliation comes with steps. The restorative justice, a program started to work within the prison complex, uses Matthew 18 names 5 steps: Taking Responsibility, Confession and Repentance, Forgiveness, Making Amends, Reconciliation.

We must first take responsibility. Both sides owning up to the part we played in our conflict. Oftentimes, this can be the hardest part and can derail all work.

I have a Pastor friend of mine named Hannah. Hannah was called a lot of things in seminary: abrasive, aggressive, bull in a china shop, confrontational. She fought for the things she believed in and wasn't afraid of conflict. At least I didn't think so.

Until I got to know Hannah more. And she taught me that she was actually terrified every time she met with our dean to push them to being a more welcoming place for single moms, for LGBTQ people, for people of color. But that working towards the things you believed in was worth it.

And she taught me the most backwards thing I ever learned about reconciliation. She was in an argument with someone on our campus. It was one of those arguments that quickly got out of hand, where suddenly they were swinging personal attacks at Hannah. I, knowing the quick wit and sharp tongue that Hannah had, expected her to quickly tear this person apart. I laughed thinking "if only they knew who they were dealing with." And in a strange turn of events, Hannah told them that the way they were talking to her was hurtful. That they had hurt her feelings. In a moment where I expected an all defensive move, Hannah went vulnerable.

And it disarmed everyone in the room. The person she was fighting broke down, realizing that they were a bully and never intended to be. The argument became a conversation. They

lowered their voices and for the first time, began to actually hear each other. They weren't reconciled that day. I don't know how long it took—or if it ever did—but that was the day that I learned that reconciliation starts with listening and vulnerability. It's choking your pride and showing all your cards and trusting that if that person is truly a part of your community and committed to keeping that community, they will see you. They will listen to you.

There is so much reconciliation work to be done around us. God calls us to bind ourselves to one another and one another's struggles and to loosen our shackles of pride and ego. On this Labor Day, May we remember that the sweetest fruit takes time. The closest bonds take trust. What makes a skillful sailor isn't a smooth sea, but many crashing waves that they learned to maneuver.

In times of trouble, let us lean on one another. Letting our cards show. Baring our hearts. And trusting the Holy Spirit to guide our listening hearts and vulnerable confessions and hard amends.

Matthew 18 ends with a promise to the church that I send to you, through the distance that COVID-19 has forced upon us. Know that where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. God, the great reconciler of the world, is here with us, wherever you are. Amen.