

September 7, 2014
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

Addressing the mess

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina smashed into the Gulf Coast of the United States. Houses were flooded, neighborhoods were destroyed, entire towns were washed away. Many people lost their lives and many more lost everything they had. In Biloxi, MS, a huge wall of sea water called a storm surge, engulfed most of the city, flooding it for days. Months later, I went to Biloxi with a Presbyterian Disaster Assistance team, and we spent our time cleaning up the mess that the water had left behind. And that meant gutting people's houses, pulling out all their belongings and putting them on the curb. And then tearing up the floors, and pulling down the walls and getting to the bare studs of the house. Because of all the mold. The black, disgusting, ever-present mold. That was growing in and around and under everything that the storm surge had soaked. And the humidity of the south had only made it worse. The mold was everywhere in every house. And every person with a house had to address it. Because if they didn't, they'd get very sick. If they

didn't, then their houses would rot. If they didn't do the work that needed to be done, before long, they wouldn't have a home to live in. The same is true in our lives and especially true in our church communities. That's what Jesus is telling us today. That if we want to have a healthy home, a healthy church, then we've got to address the mess. When sin happens, when someone trespasses against us, when hurts or offenses or wrongs affect our life together, Jesus says: we've got to deal with it. Address the mess, he says. Seek to repair the problem or things will go from bad to worse. The air in your community will get toxic. The foundations will start to warp. And before long, your church will no longer be fit for habitation.

You've got to address the mess. You've got to try to fix the problem.

Because there are going to be problems. The church would be perfect except for the fact that it is made up of human beings. Messy, messed-up human beings. That's what the church is made of. And Jesus knew that.

Jesus knew that since his church was full of human beings like us, it would have issues. There would be problems. And grudges and quarrels.

And comments misinterpreted and mis-remembered. That folks would

hurt one another and be hurt by one another. Notice Jesus says when a church member sins against you. Not if. In our church community, messes are going to happen.

In Biloxi, after the hurricane, every house was a mess. And every kind of house was a mess, every shack, every apartment, every beautiful mansion. All of them had mold. There was no use pretending your house didn't. Because it did. Everything had been flooded with sea water. And everyone was in the same boat. Black, white, rich, poor, young, old, newcomers, old-timers. Everyone had the same problem. It's just like the problem every human being has. All of us are struggling with our faults and failings. Black, white, rich, poor, young, old. We are all struggling with our own selfishness and ingratitude and impatience and inability to do any better. We are all struggling to get outside of ourselves and our own storm surge of hurts and needs. Each one of us, in our own special way, is a hot mess.

But sometimes, that we pretend we aren't. Or we expect we shouldn't be. Sometimes people think that church communities should be mess-free zones. As if people here are not human beings at all. They expect

that in this community, no one makes mistakes. No one is strange or weird or broken. There aren't any people here who are awkward or preoccupied or irritated or tired or grumpy or politically incorrect or have a very odd sense of humor. People don't expect to find human beings here. And we in the church we have done our part to confirm that that is true. We are reluctant to admit that being part of a church community is messy. And that you will have to deal with someone else's issues here as well as your own. We want people to come join us after all. So we invite people to share a well-crafted religious experience, a brilliantly taught educational program, an impersonal, pre-packaged-for-your-convenience encounter with God. In a very tidy, not human community. Sometimes that's how we try to sell church. As a disembodied product. As a consumable good. A try-it-and-you'll-like-it experience. When that's not what the church is meant to be at all.

The church is a community of people. Human beings, called together by God to love one another, through thick and thin. Community is what Jesus invites us into. He says when two or three are gathered together he will be among us. And in our community of human beings, we will learn

what it means to love and to forgive when there are problems. As Jesus says, it's not IF we have conflict, it's WHEN we have conflict. When we do, we must deal with it in a Christ-like way. It's how we deal with the messiness of community that makes us the church.

So what should we do that disappointing moment comes when someone sins against us? When someone in our community offends us or irritates us. Or takes our parking spot. Or makes the coffee too weak. Or allows their kids to be too noisy. Or when someone sings the hymns too slowly. Or doesn't print our name in the directory right. Or makes a comment about our hair or the turkey sweater we got from our great aunt Ida.

When someone slights us or ignores us or repeats misinformation about us or does something that is not at all in the Spirit of Christ's love. What should we do?

Our first impulse might be to quit the community. When we are sinned against, we might just take our ball and go find a different church. There are certainly lots of options out there to choose from. In the sixth century, Christian monks did something like that. But instead of church hopping, it was monastery hopping. When issues arose, they would

move from one community to another to another. So when St. Benedict of Nursia set up his monastic order, one of the rules he had was the rule of stability. No more monastery hopping. Once you were in, you stayed in. Benedict believed that for a community to be a real community, it should not have revolving doors. The monks had to stick together. They had to be committed to staying through the ups and downs and highs and lows. So when someone sinned against you, when you had a problem with another monk, you couldn't just leave. You had to work it out. For the sake of the whole community.

There are might be times when our issues can't be resolved, but what Jesus wants is for his church to be a place that actually practices forgiveness and reconciliation. Quitting a community might solve a problem temporarily, but you are still going to take your own messy self with you and you will encounter other messy selves wherever you go.

What Jesus wants is for us to learn to deal with it. To show the world that we really do love one another.

So Jesus says that when someone sins against us, the first thing we should do is go speak to them alone. Out of love and respect, talk to

them first. Don't address the mess by talking about it with everyone else. Don't address the mess by telling your side of the story to all of your friends and your hair dresser and your golf buddies to get them on your side. Jesus says his disciples must love one another and that they must love one another enough to talk to each other.

This is probably one of the hardest things Jesus asks us to do. I know personally it's tough for me to try to talk to someone I have an issue with. It is downright scary to deal directly with the conflict. Especially when that person has already hurt you. And it's so much easier to avoid it trying to fix it.

But that's kind of like living in a house full of black mold and trying to ignore the problem. Talking about it won't fix it. Only addressing it directly with love will. Go to the person alone. But if that doesn't work, take some friends to try to repair things. If that doesn't work, take the community to try to reconcile with them. If that doesn't work, then let it rest. But only after you have really and truly tried. Let them be like a tax collector or Gentile, remembering that according to scripture, Jesus especially loved tax collectors and Gentiles. If we want to be Jesus'

community, if we want to be healthy, then we have to love one another enough to fix things and address the mess.

The apostle Paul agrees that that's what makes us the church. That's what sets us apart as followers of Jesus. That we love one another enough to stick together. Paul says we owe it to each other. We are obligated as a community to do that. Church is not simply about my personal relationship with Jesus. It's about our relationship with Jesus and how that relationship is lived out in the ways we love one another. And we do this together because that's what Jesus commanded us to do. He didn't suggest it. Or imply it. Or recommend it as a good idea. He said, this is my commandment, that you love one another. And Paul says, that commandment is really the only commandment there is. It's the heart of God's law. Love your neighbor as yourself. Because if you love your neighbor, then you won't steal from them or cheat them or injure them. You won't try to hurt them even if they've hurt you. If you love your neighbor, Paul says, you do the good you would want done to you. You the good that they don't deserve, because that's what God did for you, sending Jesus Christ his only son, to clean up the mess in this

world and give us a place to call home again. Do the good, love one another. That's what this community is about.

Where two or three are gathered, I am there among them. Thankfully, we don't do any of this without help. When we dealt with the moldy walls in Mississippi, we had help. We had one another and we had gloves and face masks. We had protection in the mess. We filters for those toxic things that could do us harm. It's good to have a filter when dealing with sin too. Paul tells us that we are to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." As we live together in our messes, we need Jesus among us. We need his power to redeem and transform. We need Jesus in the midst of all of this. And all we need to do is ask.

In this community. In all of our lives. In all of our messes. Jesus is among us, strengthening us. Loving us. Forgiving us as we forgive one another. And every time we come to this table, and every time we eat this bread together and drink this cup together, we proclaim that this is who we are. And what life together is all about. Sharing grace. Sharing hope. Loving one another we are loved. Thanks be to God.