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Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
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Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20  
"If at first you don't succeed..."

A wise teacher asked his students how they could tell when night ended and day was on its way back. "Could it be when you see an animal in the distance and can tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?" "No," answered the teacher. "Could it be when you look at a tree in the distance and can tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?" "No." Well, then," the students asked, "when is it?" "It is when you look on the face of any man or woman and see that he or she is your brother or sister. Because if you cannot do that, then no matter what time it is, it is still night."

This might be a parable for the sermon today which is about including everyone as members of God's community. It doesn't always end up that way. It's about reaching out to one who hurts us. It's about choices people make.

After reading the gospel passage a few times I remembered a book published 30 years ago called *Caring Enough to Confront* by David Augsburger, pastor in the Mennonite Church and professor in pastoral counseling.

Augsburger's book sums up the intention behind the gospel story. The passage leads with the key sentence: "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." We are not told what the "sin" is. You've been abused, violated or infringed upon in some way.

Scripture states: When the one who is at fault listens to you then you have a friend. Reconciliation is accomplished. If the offender refuses to listen to you then you tell a few witnesses who will carry the concern to the person and if you are not listened to again then you tell the church and the church brings the concern to the violator.

In a modern, litigious context one would be wary of bringing second and third parties into a private quarrel. I read some time ago that a person sued a church for defamation when the church confronted the said person about a private violation. For good reason we need to be careful in approaching another with an accusation.

One on one, private conversations tend to be safe but not always possible when the violator is the dominant or aggressive party. We've come a long way from the early days of simply going to a person with a concern singly, with a group or with the whole church.

However, the intention of the text is to do our level best to be in caring conversation with the one who "sins" against us, whatever the "sin" is, in order to accomplish forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration.

The repeated visits call to mind the adage: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, and try again."

We don't hit back. If we followed the gospel example our world would be in a better place. It's a model for world peace. Instead, we experience in personal and global relationships a cycle of violence, an action, reaction, counter-action cycle. Christians and Muslims in Nigeria who are embroiled in politics and economics and blame over land and elections are at each other's throats with killings and reprisals. The gospel story cuts through this.

The story itself is not that simple: It is said that the story reflects more the teachings of the early church than the original teaching of Jesus because of the verse: "If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." In other words, a not so good outsider.

Commentators say Jesus would be more persistent in his outreach and more conciliatory. He wouldn't give up. This is a practical concern of the established church. In fact, "church" is specifically mentioned and the church was established after Jesus' ministry. Jesus might not have done this as he wandered the highways and byways of Palestine but it seems to be a helpful and last resort for the church.

No matter how much we reach out to someone they might continue to harbor a resentment or hurt that caused them to lash out in the first place. Or they are just mean-spirited and spiteful.

I heard a story of a long established spiritual growth group that was joined from time to time by new members. One new member became so disruptive to the caring dynamics of the group that they had to let the person go and they had to do it through a therapist.

New Testament biblical scholar Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza told a group at San Francisco Theological Seminary that divorce in marriage is liberation for persons serially abused by his or her spouse after failed attempts at restoration. Marriage counselors agree.

Still, separation is the last thing we want in members of our community. We want to be together and work together the best we can. How else can we be a model for world peace?

Paul in his letter to the church in Rome, the subject of our first reading, reiterates the primary intention in any relationship and violation, when he states: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

David Augsburg's book *Caring Enough to Confront* integrates Jesus' intention with Paul's summary of Jesus' commandment to love. The gospel story is about the best way to handle conflict and the most loving way to approach one who has "sinned" against one whether the "sin" is abuse, robbery, embezzlement, slander, vindictiveness, you name it.

The blurb on the Augsburg's book states that many people try to avoid conflict, but confrontation (this might be too harsh a word) can be a catalyst for deeper loving care...Caring enough to "confront" can build trust, cope with blame and prejudice, and be honest about anger and frustration. A caring approach resolves conflict in a healthy and healing way.

A reviewer of Augsburg's book mentions: "Growing up, I was under the impression that confrontation was a negative thing - that if I confronted a person about an issue then that meant I was a bad person for having poor or hurt feelings...I came to understand that confrontation could actually be a positive response to negative behavior."

Joanne Kanute, a Certified Life Coach, writes: "Growing up we were led to believe that if you confront an issue or person you were a 'trouble maker'. However, when it is appropriate for me to speak, I want to do so clearly, honestly, personally, directly and in simple statements. Confronting and caring stimulate growth. A relationship will be as good as its communication."

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has a fair and caring judicial process through our constitution to address situations where people have violated important values and beliefs. The one responsible for a violation is brought before a judicial commission and if found to be in the wrong is censured or disciplined and required to undergo therapy or some form of reflection before re-entering the fold. If they refuse the counsel of the church they have in effect chosen themselves not to be members of the church.

The gospel passage ends with an affirmation of community. Jesus says: "...where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Healing, reconciliation and restoration of relationships keep us in the community of faith. In that way we affirm community with Jesus.

And so we come to Holy Communion today to affirm our relationship with Jesus and with each other. It's the joyful feast of the people of God. We celebrate communion and our community. In Holy Communions throughout the year, we hear Jesus' invitations, such as:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

A different invitation is given in Holy Communion today but we hear the others as well.

Come to the table today and know that Jesus, the early church and our church community desire above all good, caring, loving, peaceful, reconciling and just relationships with and among all in the church and hopefully with those outside the church as well. Amen.