



Matthew 18:15-20

SPIRIT IN THE DESERT

“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If that person 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. *Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*”

Grace and peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move and have our being

At first glance, these passages are sticky and yukky. They describe a type of authoritarian control over a person who has offended another. Sure, it starts out innocent by saying to go to the offender in private and see if they listen to you. If you decide they didn't listen, go get two witnesses. If you decide they still haven't listened, then all bets are off, because now they must deal with the all-male elder board.

In our day and age who knows who makes up an elder board? What secrets do they have that remain hidden? Things an elder board simply chooses to overlook because there is no one else to serve or they are one of the larger donors. I may sound cynical because I am. I am skeptical of any human or group of humans who claim moral authority over others in the name of Jesus the Liberator.

This whole thing reminds me of a family I was working with whose daughter became pregnant. The Christian academy kicked her out because, they said, “It would glorify teen pregnancy and premarital sex.”

The way I saw it, as a consultant to the family, the pregnant teen would soon “show” her sin. She would be unable to hide her sin the way everyone else hides their sin. So, the school needed to expel her to protect the image of the school. Besides, they feared other students may think they condone the behavior by loving her through the process.

Maybe today it needs to work like this. The teen first goes to the principal to address the rejection she feels by the school. If the principal does not listen, then she brings her family members or a friend or two as witnesses. Then, if he and the school board still do not listen to the call for restorative justice, she brings her entire church community to ask for restorative justice. I could get on board with that process!

I find it difficult to see today's institutions capable of being the pursuer of restorative love and justice. Radical grace would give the Christian academy a blemish.

As a side note, any place that claims to be a place of hospitality, grace or healing in the name of Jesus, cannot hide behind attempts to save an institution as an excuse to exhibit graceless, authoritative procedures over individuals who serve the institution's mission to heal and renew lives in the name of Jesus.

Matthew says Jesus told them to treat those who haven't listened as gentiles and tax collectors. Hmm, that's interesting considering Jesus liked to hang out with those two groups. He saw gentiles and tax collectors as belonging to the family of God who just did not understand the new ways of the Christian world. Welcome them. Let them grow. Or as Jesus said on the cross, "forgive them they obviously don't know what they're doing!"

I get a yukky feeling when I read these passages because of the way they have been used even to the level of spiritual abuse.

I think of the women I met in treatment for anorexia who were told by their pastors that the disease originated from sin. Some women even begged for a priest to come to the facility to hear their confession and rid them of their shame.

In private sessions, I learned that they had deep devotion to God, yet their inability to please God was what drove them to self-hatred. The expectations of a church and family can drive a person to despair and self-loathing. Sacrificing their bodies as punishment for being unable to meet up to their church, their husband's public image or their "God-fearing" parents and their own high expectations.

Maybe we've forgotten how Jesus taught us to treat others, and this is why we have no love filter by which to see everything else in this gospel.

So, maybe the words, "there I am in the midst of you" is not only comforting, but also a warning that 'I AM' is always with you when you come together in my name.

If we are going to invoke Jesus, remember I AM, who has ultimate authority, is divinely there. Predator beware.

Another passage comes to mind.

"In as much as you have done this to the least of these you have done it unto me."
Why? Because 'I AM' is there.

So, I thought I'd read this passage from the bottom up and begin with restoring the nature of church as it was with the early church as a foundation for dealing with conflict. So here is my swing at it.

May your community first be established as a place of kinship and belonging, where people can be seen and one is not made to carry the burden of heartache and suffering alone. The place where two or three have gathered in love and in the name of healing the broken, restoring the lost, and loosing the freedom of forgiveness; That's where I

Am! Both in and among you right there in that very place. Therefore, if someone has hurt you, go to them and no one else. Gossip and inuendo do not have a place in an environment of grace. In this presence of love and receptivity go to your brother or sister. And may you use the keys of the kingdom to unbind unforgiveness, loose radical acceptance and let humility and compassion permeate your community.

Maybe if churches stopped presenting themselves as unconditionally welcoming, or a safe place, then it can be a brave place where the presence and name of God is revered more than the traditions and rituals. Where the presence of 'I am' is seen by the leaders of the church.

Maybe this passage was never intended to exhibit moral or hierarchical control over others but about how to restore harmony.

"Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you're asking, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

My mother used to send me off with similar words, "Remember mijo, no matter where you go and who you are God is with you, right there, in that very place."

Remember the passage says three very important words. IN MY NAME. The name of Christ is the only anointed one and liberator. The name of Jesus unbinds unforgiveness, shame, guilt, spiritual abuse in the temple, authoritarianism, manipulation, and the misdeeds of control freaks building empires for themselves.

Today, our culture would do well to focus on verses 18 through 20.

Peter was given the keys when he acknowledged Jesus as the true liberator. Peter knew that he was not the liberator or the Anointed One. Jesus was saying to Peter, "Because you know who is truly in charge, you have the power to unbind and release love and healing, restoration and resurrection."

Now in these passages Jesus is saying this to all of us. We have the keys to unbind and lose love and healing.

Our titles are all humanly given. I am a trained and certified spiritual director. Big deal. There is only one director and it is not me. You may have been ordained by a religious body following your academic effort to shepherd others, but you are not the Shepherd.

Those institutions told us we were to be men of God and women of virtue. In our inability to do so, we faked it. But we were not called by God to be men and women of God. We were called to be children of God so we can be grace giving and compassionate men and women in the world.

Has there been a time when you experienced an environment where Spirit overrules?

How about an environment where humans overruled Spirit?

The I AM was present in both environments for you and I, his children. Amen