

Matthew 18:15-20 *The Wronged, the Wrongdoer, and the Witnesses*

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15 "If a brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If he or she listens to you, you have regained that one. 16 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. 17 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. 18 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. 19 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. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

A few years ago I was at a writing conference for clergy where I learned, firsthand, what “mansplaining” is. The group was about half and half male and female, but the men in the group were constantly dominating the discussion, jumping in to clarify things that the women had said, or offering up information we didn’t ask for or need. The most glaring example was when one woman, the only African-American in the whole group, asked to share a poem by Langston Hughes, because that day was his birthday. She had just opened her mouth to read, when one of the men leapt to his feet and said, “Wait! Before you begin, let me tell you a little bit about Langston Hughes.” He proceeded to speak for several minutes. When he was done, she just looked at him impassively, said, “Uh-huh,” and read the poem.

Now, that conference was an anomaly for me. As a pastor, I generally do feel heard. And I'm surrounded by men, both personally and professionally, who are respectful and inclusive. But I'm aware that that's not true for everyone. The other white women in the group and I were incensed by what was happening there, but it was clear from the flat response of the one, Black female in the group that this was something she experienced all the time.

So, what does it take to be heard? And, particularly, what does it take to be heard when you've been wronged? Well sometimes, as Jesus makes clear, it takes a lot. And the irony is, the scenario he lays out is all within the context of the church, not with total strangers or even enemies. "If a *brother or sister* wrongs you," Jesus begins, "go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." You would think that that would be the end of it, but no. Jesus knows the likelihood that the person being confronted will not listen, or will refuse to accept responsibility.

When that happens, he says, the wronged party is to gather just a couple of witnesses to stand alongside them and bolster their case.

And if there is still no satisfaction, then they are to call in the whole church. The whole church!

This is a passage about how to have healthy relationships. Here's the thing I like about this passage: Jesus says clearly that no one should be a silent victim. When someone we care about—someone who should care about us—harms us, we shouldn't just passively swallow it. We should insist on being heard, and insist on holding the other person accountable. Jesus tells us so. Why? Because there is no real relationship without both honesty and accountability—it's all just a shell. And if the injured party puts themselves out there to demand justice, and the wrongdoer won't own up, even after multiple interventions—then the relationship is too broken to be fixed. "Let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector," Jesus says. Which is so different from what we might expect from Jesus.

How often have we heard that the Christian thing is just to forgive, forgive, forgive? Women, in particular, have been given that message. But to forgive is not the same as to stick with that person and keep absorbing abuse. "Let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Get out of the relationship, he's saying. Put some distance between you and them.

We've talked a lot over the last few months about the need for our nation to listen to African-Americans; a lot about the hurts that our nation has caused, and even the ways in which the white churches have been complicit in establishing, maintaining and profiting from White Supremacy. But that's more about what's on the outside,

in our politics and culture. What has really come home to me, recently, is the way in which our own denomination has harmed African-Americans member within our denomination by side-lining and silencing them.

I thought things were changing. In fact, two years ago our General Assembly—the national gathering of Presbyterians that happens every two years--appointed a Task Group to research and report on the disparities that Black Women and Girls experience, asking them to create recommendations for how the church could respond. The Task Group was told that the General Assembly would hear their report at this last summer's General Assembly. But then, of course, COVID hit. When those who were planning the Assembly realized that it would have to be by Zoom, they knew they needed to pare down the agenda, so they decided to postpone several items until the next meeting, two years from now. That makes sense, except that, among the items they decided could wait, was this one. In this year of racial reckoning, they decided it was okay to put off listening to the voices of Black women and girls.

Several commissioners made a motion to set aside the agenda and hear the report this year, but changing the agenda would have required a two-thirds majority, and the motion failed, narrowly. The general sense was that people were just too tired to take up one more thing. Too tired.

Since that meeting, African-American Presbyterians have poured out their hurt, their anger, and their sense of betrayal. Here is one of them speaking. Her name is Christian Brooks, and she works with Jimmie Hawkins at our denomination's Office of Public Witness.

Said Ms. Brooks, *“The option to get tired and not address issues regarding black women and girls is privilege...because I don't have that option. Myself being a black woman, I don't have the option to turn away from black women and girls' issues, and to do so is to stand in White Privilege and to stand in White Supremacy that we say we are supposed to dismantle. I really want to communicate that very, very, very clearly, because tired don't work. We don't have the option to be tired as people who are oppressed, and because we don't have that option, our allies should not have that option, either.”*¹

In the room where that decision was made were the wronged—raising their voices and crying out to be heard.

In that room were also the wrongdoers—those who refused to hear those voices.

¹ From *PC(USA) Week of Action: Anti-Racism Town Hall - August 25, 2020*, <https://www.facebook.com/pcusa/videos/754574255363159/>

But in that room, at that meeting, there were also the witnesses—those who spoke out for something different and, in the aftermath, have continued to add their voices in protest of the silencing.

Those witnesses include our presbytery's commissioners, all of whom voted to hear the report, and who have made sure that our presbytery is aware of what happened and of their deep disappointment. And, in the aftermath of that meeting, sixteen former moderators and vice-moderators of our denomination—white, black, and Latinx, male and female-- have issued a joint statement in protest of what happened. All of that gives me a bit of hope. Hope that maybe, now that those of us who are part of the majority-white membership of our denomination have heard the pain of our siblings, we will open our ears, take responsibility for our own role in their silencing, and stand with them to make a change.

A friend of mine recently posted a quote from Margaret Wheatley on Facebook that reads: “It is possible to prepare for the future without knowing what it will be. The primary way to prepare for the unknown is to attend to the quality of our relationships, to how well we know and trust one another.”

We are each sometimes the wronged—no matter our color or sex, we've all experienced at one time or another what it is to have our concerns denied or dismissed.

We are each sometimes the wrongdoers—closing our ears and avoiding responsibility for harm we've caused.

And we are each, sometimes, the witnesses—or failed witnesses, depending on whether we step up or turn away.

All of us have, at one time or another, deserved to be treated as “a Gentile or a tax collector.” But here's the thing—the hopeful thing. Jesus had a soft spot for Gentiles and tax collectors. Those were precisely the groups who, when they were given the opportunity to do so, seemed the most willing to change.

If we, white Presbyterians can change the way we relate to people of color in our own denomination—if we can listen when we need to, own up to our failings, and stand as witnesses when called upon to do so—then we won't just heal those relationships: we will also be forming new habits that will strengthen our other relationships, within the church, within our families, and beyond.

We know the harms of the past. We can't predict the future—but we can make sure it's better than the present, by attending to our relationships; which is something we all need to work on, because whether we're the wronged, the wrongdoers, or the witnesses—we're all here. We're all part of it. Together, we can finally learn from *Jesus*—and get on with being the kind of church Jesus calls us to be.

