

Old Testament lesson – Ezekiel 33:1-20

New Testament lesson – Matthew 18:15-20

Meddling

My brother Roger was 8 years old when I was born. My clearest memory of him from my very young life was something he did at night. We slept in trundle beds; he was on the higher one. He had a glow-in-the-dark skeleton that he used to charge up, and after the lights were out he would dangle it down in my face and scare me. It was pretty effective on a 3- or 4-year old. One day I was generally tired of being teased and tormented by him. In anger I climbed up on his bed and wet it down.

I suppose he eased up for a while, but he didn't quit.

On the plus side, he considered me his exclusive territory for such treatment. Heaven help the poor kid who might bully me around the neighborhood. A couple of slightly older boys once forced me to climb into an old well that was almost filled in with dirt, with about two feet of hole showing where the well used to be.

My brother took exception to that dangerous stunt. He happened to encounter one of the boys at the local shopping strip about a mile from our house, and he grabbed the kid by the ankles and bounced his head on the sidewalk a few times. I appreciated that.

Roger was a very smart man. He excelled at math. He earned a degree in physics from the University of Illinois, and eventually worked in petroleum exploration. He used nuclear technology to analyze wells, which enabled him to find a lot of oil for some companies. He held several patents on such processes.

At the age of 37, he had a single cardiac bypass, and unfortunately, this revealed that he was actually what I have heard a couple conservative podcasters refer to as a "stupid smart person," though not in their usual sense.

He returned back to work too fast, and it caused him unnecessary pain. So he decided he never wanted to go through that again, and for 30 years he neglected his cardiac health. Shortly after some surgery to clear up a fungal infection

in his skull, he died. He had been feeling bad, and his wife told him to call the doctor. He said he would wait for his regular surgery follow-up appointment a few days later. Instead, he died.

Because it was not expected as a result of that particular surgery, they did an autopsy. His heart was 50% necrotic. Sixty-seven years old, dead of massive heart failure that probably could have been prevented or at least postponed by quite a few years. He thought he knew better than the doctors and his wife.

A few years earlier, he had come up from Texas for our mother's 90th birthday party. It was on a Sunday while Annette was in Malawi. Just before I left, I said, "Well, some of us have to work tomorrow, so I need to go." He took serious offense at that, because he had taken time off work to attend the party. In the previous 40 years, I could count on one hand the number of times he had driven to Illinois to visit our parents. His work was too important to waste time off with a mere visit to family, unless it was combined with some other vacation trip.

During a phone call following Mom's party, he told me how little he thought of teaching. He said it wasn't a real job because I didn't have to meet any kind of deadlines like he did. It was my turn to be offended. I had hourly deadlines, daily deadlines, weekly deadlines, semester deadlines and annual deadlines. I was mad and hurt by such an insult. He had taught for a year after college, so I suppose he should have known better. But no one's job was more important than his.

In all my adult life, I could not remember him calling me even one time. So when I stopped calling him, we had no communication – right up through the day he died.

When my brother died, I still had something against him. I knew that, and I'm pretty sure he knew that. But though his prideful remark had insulted me, his pride ended up killing him. But I regret the fact that for two and a half years I had done nothing to try to repair that breach. I

thought there was still time. After all, 65 was not that old. Neither was 66 or 67. But he never made it to 68.

Jesus was keenly aware of the sinfulness of human beings, and he knew that such relationship breaches would occur in the church, just as they do in families or the workplace or elsewhere. He also knew that such breaches will fester if left untreated, and such festering sores will damage the church and weaken it more than one could imagine. So doctor Jesus gave his disciples a prescription to cure such a relational disease.

Unfortunately, it sounds easy on paper, but it is extremely uncomfortable to fill the prescription. In order to do so, one must be willing to confront another person. Now, in regard to confrontation, there are generally two types of people. Some enjoy it, while others hate it and will avoid it at all costs.

But those who enjoy confrontation will most often engage in it to prove their superiority. That's not what Jesus was prescribing. This confrontation must be done with love, with the primary concern being for the person being confronted. The desire must be to restore a healthy relationship between fellow followers of Christ, not to gain the upper hand in the relationship. The goal is the peace of the Church.

Now, there are some scholars who will say that the use of the word "church" by Jesus is evidence that he did not say this. He taught before there was a Christian Church, so anything that uses that term was added later by the gospel writers.

I suppose that is something to consider. It is possible that they inserted the word "church" into some of the teachings of Jesus because it was clear that they were intended for people who wanted to follow him, like the apostles. So the use of the word "church" is quite consistent with the intention of the lesson. In addition, it comes to us with the authority of the apostles, which is to say, the authority of Jesus.

It is interesting that this gospel lesson is paired with the OT lesson from Ezekiel in today's lectionary. I expanded the Ezekiel reading a bit in each direction, forward and backward. It is a rather frightening lesson to me. Every time I come across it, I worry that I have not warned people as much as I should. That feeling grows more intense as I grow older, and my experience in life piles up.

With the passing years, my awareness of sin increases, both in my life and in the world around me. I am aware of my own sin, but the watchman passage reminds me of the dangers of the sin I see around me. And sometimes I feel almost compelled to speak out against it. Often that means I speak out about abortion or the evils of communism. Other times I focus on matters closer to home. Today is one of those.

I have served as co-pastor in this church since 2008, except for the year we spent in Scotland. Even though it has been part-time, I have still learned a fair amount about the people of the congregation. I have known of various family squabbles for some time. But I am learning how deep and how serious some of them are, and I feel a need to fill the role of the watchman today. It is time to deal with these squabbles according to the instructions of Jesus. It is time for people to be reconciled to one another.

Those people who need to do this know who they are. The chances are rather good that others know that as well. And there is a very high likelihood that there are a number of such squabbles that I know nothing about. You know who you are, and you may or may not think that I don't know. Be assured, that even if I know nothing about one squabble or another, God knows, and the lesson applies to you just as much as if I were sitting in your home talking to you directly.

Perhaps you realize you are the one who has sinned against someone else, and you will just wait to see if they pay attention to this lesson and decide to obey Jesus and approach you. But in the Sermon on the Mount, we have this

instruction from Jesus: *"But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."*

It makes no difference whether you are the offended party or the offending party. Jesus lays the responsibility on both sides or all sides of a church family squabble to take the initiative and work towards reconciliation.

But why bother with reconciliation? Why not just put it out of your mind, forgive and forget, let bygones be bygones, and so on? Why should we bother with the hard work of reconciliation? Won't that just lead to more conflict?

Well, it might. But in the instructions of Jesus, there is an implicit assumption. If it's people in his Church who are involved, they will want to obey him. They will want to follow him. They will want to love others as he loves them. They will want to do what is best for the Church of Jesus Christ.

Of course, sometimes people are stubborn and pig-headed. Sometimes they don't want to admit their sin in specific terms. We're all good with confessing sins in general in a unison prayer of confession. Maybe we're even OK with admitting our specific sins to God. But we often draw the line at admitting to another person that we actually sinned against them.

Sometimes, though, that is exactly what is needed, if reconciliation is to occur. And that is an essential part of the Christian Church. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians that we have the ministry of reconciliation. In Ephesians he said that Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between people and made us all one in him.

If you are not willing to work towards that, I don't know what to tell you. But hear again what Jesus says about people who are not willing to be

reconciled: *"if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."* That is a very serious treatment to give someone.

Of course, it would be best if we did not have to bring such things in front of the whole church. But this ultimate action shows how important it is to Jesus to have everyone in a church on the same page, so to speak. It shows how important it is to him that there be no dividing wall of hostility between people.

He never saw it as an option that people should just claim to forgive someone while they, in fact, continue to harbor resentment. But they keep it hidden so they can continue putting up a front of working together for the good of the Church.

If we want to be part of the Church of Jesus Christ, if we want to follow Jesus as his disciples, that sort of behavior is not really acceptable. We can continue in that mode, but then we should not try to fool ourselves into thinking we are really a church made of disciples of Jesus.

I know this is a difficult thing to do. I knew I should have done something along these lines with my own brother. But I didn't, and then that became "I couldn't."

Knowing this is difficult, I will try to put my money where my mouth is, so to speak. If you want to have reconciliation with someone in the church or in your family, I am willing to help. I'm not willing to take sides. I don't want to hear about what someone did that was too bad for reconciliation. I don't want to hear that your situation is different, it's worse than most. It isn't. I hate to disappoint you, but you're not that special. Your situation is not so bad that you are exempt from the instructions of Jesus.

I am willing to sit down with the people involved and worked towards genuine reconciliation. But be warned: it will require love and mercy and humility and real forgiveness. That has always been the intent behind the instructions of Jesus for his Church.

Not too long ago when I was talking to some people about praying with their spouses, someone said, “Change is hard.” Yes, it is. This is difficult to do. But have you ever noticed how, many things that are difficult often come with

great reward once you do them? So it is with reconciliation. It is difficult – sometimes very difficult – but it is worth it. Otherwise, Jesus would not have bothered with the instructions. Amen.