

“Growing Spiritually”

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March 1, 2015

New Testament Lesson: Matthew 18:15-20

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 32:1-2, 8-9

Several months ago, I dropped my SmartPhone and cracked the screen, and it had to be replaced. Luckily, I had insurance. But the first phone they sent me didn't work right. It didn't keep the date and time, so my calendar reminders were popping up at the wrong time on the wrong day. I could come to see you, but not necessarily on the right day or at the right time, if my SmartPhone had anything to say about it.

The second phone they sent me, it wasn't much better – it didn't know up from down. The gyroscope was broken. Did you know your SmartPhone or Tablet has a gyroscope that keeps things right-side up? It's pretty cool. If you have a SmartPhone or Tablet with you, take it out right now. I've got my wife, Yuri's, tablet here. See how the image of Jesus stays right-side up.

If you have your phone or tablet with you, show your neighbor how this works. Pull up a picture of someone and notice that no matter which way the device is twisted and turned, the gyroscope keeps the picture right-side up.

These pictures in our phones and tablets and on our computers represent the relationships in our lives. Don't you wish you had a relationship gyroscope, something that can set things right again whenever things get turned around with someone in your life? Wouldn't it be nice if, no matter how upside-down things have gotten, there is always a way to set things right, to get right-side up again with that other person?

Well, there is. Jesus doesn't give us a gyroscope for our relationships. He gives us the Gospel-scope, a Gospel-centered outlook on life that keeps everything right-side up, including our relationships with one another.

There are three parts to the Gospel-scopic way of responding when we get upset or angry or disappointed with someone. The first thing Jesus tells us to do is, “go, ... go and point out the fault,” says Jesus.

This indicates a sense of urgency, that our relationships are important and worth working on, even as hard as that can be. It's not easy to talk things out with someone who has clearly wronged you. In fact, it's easier to live with the hurt, or to pour out our anger and frustration somewhere else, or to go straight to a higher authority without even giving the other person a chance – easier, but not healthy.

The more time you spend on earth, the more you'll come to see that dealing with things directly and in the spirit of Christ is so much more healthier – and easier – for everyone.

The second thing Jesus tells us is to “point out the fault when the two of you are alone” – go, and go by yourself, just the two of you. This tells us that the one we are really concerned about here is the other person, not ourselves. Jesus wants us to show concern for the other person’s feelings. No one wants to be ganged up on when we’ve done something wrong. Give the other person a chance to explain his or her point of view, and maybe even apologize and set things right.

It’s kind of like when our church Session reviewed and approved the annual statistical report last month. I noted that out of the 324 members, 200 are female, saying, “It seems the women outweigh the men in this church.”¹ My mistake! I was quickly and politely corrected by the female elders, who informed me that the correct word is “outnumber,” not “outweigh.” It’s a joke; I didn’t really say that when Session approved the stats. But the point is to work it out with someone, right away, when he or she has wronged you in some way.

The third thing Jesus tells us to do is to engage the church if necessary, “take it to the church, says Jesus, when someone is out of line and won’t listen to anyone else. Now this is not because we need to keep the church pure and holy and we just can’t stand it when someone does something wrong. Rather, it’s to “regain that one,” if possible, as Jesus said. “. . . And if the offender refuses to listen even to the church,” says Jesus, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.” Some people, you just can’t reach, at least not right then, and it’s best to leave it alone for a time or to part ways. As long as we keep a Gospel-sopic focus a Gospel-centered attitude – that it’s about helping each other as individuals whenever possible – we don’t have to worry about the purity of the church and being perfect, which none of us is.

We’re not perfect and we’re not going to be perfect, at least not on this side of the cross. That’s why Jesus teaches his disciples – us included – how to get along, one-on-one and as the church. The church is given the sacred duty of following the Holy Spirit in discerning the will of God. In the Presbyterian denomination, we do that as instructed by Jesus, when he said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Whenever we are faced with an obstacle to the love and grace of the Lord, the Gospel-sopic way of responding is to return to Jesus, return to the Spirit of discernment that he bestows upon the church. Not that the church is – or always has been – perfect. Just like I can turn off the gyroscope on Yuri’s tablet and watch everything get stuck upside down, we – as individuals and as the church – we sometimes turn away from the Gospel-sopic way of Jesus. We deal with things in our own way, no matter how upside down it all gets.

But the good news is that – when we catch ourselves ignoring what Jesus teaches – we can turn it back on again, turn back to the way of Jesus, so that things get set right once more. That’s our pathway for growing spiritually.

¹ Based on the humor of David Morelli, “A weighty matter,” *Presbyterians Today*, June-July 2000, 5.

I don't know what past or current issue is on your mind when you think of someone who has wronged you. But I do know that Jesus gives us a way forward. If you haven't followed the way of Jesus in addressing an important issue with someone in your life by going to the person right away and talking it out one-on-one, and then if needed, bringing it to the church in some fashion – whether that's by coming to me for guidance or one of the church elders, or turning to prayer and scripture – if you haven't followed this pathway that Jesus lays out for us, now is the time!

How much longer do you want to live with the hurt or the suspicion or the disappointment? And, how much more do you want to be a part of building up the kingdom of God?!? God knows this relationship stuff isn't easy! And that's why God sent us Jesus, to show us the way. Nobody is perfect – not you, not me, not your family or your friends or your boss or your teacher or anybody you can think of. Nobody's perfect, accept Jesus. So ask yourself, when it comes to finding a way forward toward peace and reconciliation in your life, whose ways are you going to follow? Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of great love, take hold of our hearts and let us sit here in the stillness of your presence as we turn our souls to you.

Help us to be still ... and discover the mystery of the living Christ within us.

Inspire us to turn ourselves inside out in service to you. As we care for our homes, drive to work, run our errands, sit at our computers and answer our e-mails, may we remember and honor you.

As we read to our children, greet our neighbors, shop at the store, may we remember and honor you.

As we pray for those in need, ... may we remember and honor you.

For you have not forgotten us, O Lord, nor have you left us to figure things out on our own. No, you taught us how to live in your spirit with one another.

And so it is in the spirit of togetherness that we raise our voices in prayer to you, gazing up at your glory as we sing:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**