

Matthew 18:15-20
September 6, 2020

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Straight out of college, I was hired by Menards in their management trainee program, along with several other recent graduates. Over the span of the next year, we would rotate our way through each department in the store such as, “plumbing, electrical, appliances and more” as the tune from their commercials go. The second department I found myself in was “Building Materials.” That is where one goes to order 2 x 4’s, trusses, shingles, bags of concrete mix and other items located beyond the walls of the main building in the lumber yard. Many people that would come in were weekend “do-it yourselfers” and a lot of them were attempting to build a deck or replace a dilapidated one. It always amazed me so many would venture in with seemingly no plan at all. No idea what to buy, how to build it, etc. Nowadays, the store has a computer that you can go, touch a few buttons and instant presto a schematic and supply list prints out. But, in my day, that was all done by hand and somewhat remarkably, even by my own hand. I am still surprised they let me do that since I had never even driven a nail through the decking of a 2x4 into the 2x8 joist it sits upon. Yet, after some instruction by the department manager, John, who had assembled many a deck in his day, I was ready to design my first deck for some unsuspecting customer. It would be a master plan. I drew as best we could in 3 dimensional detail the layout of exactly each joist, each 4x4 corner post, each spindle of the railing and then right down to how many boxes of screws or nails one would need to complete the project. I was certain those customers, once securing the necessary items in the lumber yard, now had everything needed to build that beautiful new deck.

Well, dear church, we have a plan. Yet, truth be told, I am not sure I love it and perhaps you may not as well. Often, in our journey of faith, we look to the Bible for answers, which we most certainly should do. After all, it is the living word that guides us, rich with the wisdom of God the Spirit imparts into our very being. Matthew and the other 3 gospels reveal the wisdom of the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, our Savior, our teacher,

our leader whom last week we were reminded, with Peter, to get behind and follow. At times, his stories, parables, and teachings are a bit vague and open to interpretation. Yet, other times, like today, they are quite explicit in laying before us a detailed plan to guide our life together as the body of Christ.

So often do I hear it said, “God has a plan for my life.” I believe most Christians cling to that hope and believe it to be true, at least at some level. Yet, I also believe most Christians might disagree to an extent on exactly what that plan may be. Is everything that happens in our life part of God’s grand plan, say for instance, the coffee I spilt earlier this morning? Some would say yes, while others, myself included, would simply say God gave us some freedom to make decisions – good or bad – and the coffee spilt was the result of a poor decision to attempt to pour the coffee into a thermos in nearly pitch dark conditions. Or we may simply choose to hear the parts of the plan that sound good to us, fit our personal needs, wants or way of thought. Hey, the plan sounds good to two or three of us, so it must be right. Jesus promises to be there. Is there some gauge the church uses to deem whether our plan is the right one, that is, it adheres to God’s will and God’s relationship with God’s people and the world created by God? Because truth be told, I wrestle often trying to discern where Jesus is leading me, leading our congregation, leading the church that is called to get behind him and go where he goes. I pray and pray and do not always get a nice, drawn out schematic of what that looks like. Or I get a plan I really do not want to follow. I would rather toss it aside into the recycling bin and seek a new one that sounds better and aligns more with the plan I have devised in my mind, adheres to popular belief, or quite simply is just comfortable, secure, pads my pocketbook, or places the plan onto someone else’s shoulders relieving me from carrying out said plan.

While us Christians may not always agree, understand, or even discern God’s plan, I would contend there is one thing we can all agree on, which is that plan first and foremost involves reconciliation and love. God’s saving action in Christ to reconcile the world to God. Christ’s love that knows no limits and extends all the way to the cross, in which he gives of himself, so that we might be reconciled to God through no part of our own doing. God’s plan that life, in the end, will always conquer sin and death.

Sin is nothing more than that which severs our relationship with God. It is a stumbling block that permits us from being who God created us to be. That relationship was broken in the Garden of Eden. Today, our selfishness or longing to put ourselves in the place of God, often gets in the way and severs our relationship with God. Our desire to be right, even at the expense of another, often creates a chasm between another brother or sister in Christ. Our failure to listen, hear another brother or sister's story, see their plight, acknowledge their pain, or understand how our actions may have hurt them alienates us one from another. Sin was never part of God's plan. Yet, we must name sin for what it is. Racism is sin. Sexism is sin. Anti-Semitism is sin. Bigotry is sin. Hatred for another brother or sister is sin. Abuse is sin. Gossip is sin. One might even contend the failure to build up another brother or sister in Christ is sin. Withholding forgiveness in the Christian community might too be sin Jesus would seem to imply in his imperative immediately following the words of our passage in which he states there is no limit to the how many times we ought extend the grace of forgiveness, just as there is no limit to the abundance of God's forgiveness toward that which God created and called into life. Ultimately, all above separate God's people. They work against God's plan for life, Christ's plan for his church, God's plan of reconciliation – life in communion with God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit and with creation, humanity, each other whom we are called to love. Even our brothers and sisters who hurt us.

We all know, there are indeed times we hurt each other. We have been on either side of the equation and the path of least resistance is to walk away from the one who hurt us rather than letting that individual know the pain which was inflicted upon us, be it our physical, mental or spiritual well-being. This pain ultimately creates a stumbling block in our relationship with one another, to grow into the fullness of Jesus Christ, and yes even a stumbling block to the mission of the church. I think our pension, when we are hurt by another brother or sister, is instead to go and tell another brother or sister. Sometimes, the story we tell may be misunderstood, misinterpreted and just as quickly as we told it, that person tells it, and soon muddled versions of what actually happened spread through a congregation like wildfire resulting in more pain, more brokenness,

more division and veer a community of faith off course from being the vessel in their community that shines Christ's light, love, and his plan of reconciliation that is to flow forth to those yet to experience it, hear it, or see it.

I talk to a lot of people in our community who do not go to church. Some have in the past. Some have been deeply wounded by the church or another brother or sister in Christ. Sadly, the response I am often met with, "Why would I go to church when you all cannot get along or the way you all live does not seem to coincide with this love for all you talk about." It is a valid response. There is truth in it. It cuts like a knife when I hear that. It is not a picture of the plan God intends.

My only reply, in that scenario, is to listen. Nod by head up and down and then state, "You are right." We do get it wrong at times. We are a broken vessel in need of repair. We are sinners. Yet, that is exactly why I need the church. That is exactly why I need my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, whom I love. That is exactly why I need to come to worship, kneel at the foot of the cross, confess my wrongdoings, and then hear the plan of God that I am forgiven. We are forgiven. We are reconciled to the God, the One we so often turn our back on. Grace abounds.

I am also reminded that so often the church does get it right, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The good news is proclaimed. We do cross denominational lines, differing theologies, and truly live into the one body Paul often speaks of. One body rooted in love. One body called to love each other. One body called not to exist for itself, but rather to exist for the other. For the sake of the world. One body that reaches out instead of reaches inward upon itself. We do get it right in building up one another through words of support, encouragement, gratitude, and thanksgiving. We do get it right in forgiving another. We do get it right, amidst a global pandemic, storms of howling winds, spewed words of hate, war, vengeance, and the like through our shared mission to proclaim hope. Live out love. Shine forth light amidst darkness. Rejoice always. Pray unceasingly. Give thanks always. Be the vessel of reconciliation and resurrection through the plan sown into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, freely given to us through Christ's death and resurrection,

and breathed into our very being through the God who called us into life and upholds us each and every day.

William Hawkins writes, the unwillingness to perform the difficult task of forgiveness and reconciliation in the love and spirit of Christ is what robs the church of that quality of life that first attracted outsiders. It was that quality of the church's life that set it uniquely apart from all other attempts at creating community. By the grace of God, it still can.ⁱ We can through the plan set about by Jesus, through the call to love one another, and through that which empowers and equips us to live this out – the grace, love, forgiveness and strength we have in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior. We also have the glorious promise of Jesus that when we do this work of reconciliation, when we meet the one who has sinned against us or we listen to the one we have sinned against, when we go with another brother or sister or the church, we are not alone. He is with us.

I suppose at times my plans drawn up for a deck had to be modified. Perhaps, the builder decided to add another set of steps, a pergola, make it bigger or smaller and thus had to deviate from the drawings. I believe it is important that at times we too, for the sake of the other, may have to slightly divert from the plan Jesus lays out. For instance, when it is not safe or possibly even advisable for a brother or sister to go it alone initially. It is then, we must stand with them, beside them, or even in their place to seek the reconciliation we hope may come. Reconciliation may not always come about. Jesus makes that point known. Yet, I do wonder what his church and congregations might look like if we lived into carrying out this plan of reconciliation, healing, forgiveness, and ultimately new life for the priesthood of all believers. I suspect it would look like the kingdom of God breaking in upon us here and now. A kingdom we all long to see and be part of. A kingdom the world so longs to see. A kingdom much different than that of the world.

ⁱ William Hawkins; www.christiancentury.org, “Unforgiven: Matthew 18:15-20; Romans 13:8-14.