

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
 Restoring Broken Relationships
 Jesus gives us a way to mend relationships, not cancel them
 Scripture: Matthew 18:15-20
 Rev. Steve Filyk
 September 5, 2021

Are you careful about what you say in emails?
 Are you careful about your comments and posts on social media?

You should be...

These days people are publicly shamed for bad tweets,
 unpopular opinions, and past transgressions.

In the words of the employment lawyer,
 media commentator, and columnist Kathryn Marshall:

"The goal isn't just to humiliate or to shame.
 And it certainly isn't to elicit an apology.
 The objective is to literally remove a person
 from every semblance of their life — personal and professional.

To destroy that person's career, influence, respect
 and render them so radioactive
 that no company, person or employer
 will ever want to touch them...
 In other words, cancelled.ⁱ

This isn't just a practise of our neighbors to the south.
 As another commentator reminds us,

"In Canada, Stockwell Day was dropped as a CBC commentator
 and removed from two corporate directorships
 for saying Canada isn't systemically racist.

Veteran CBC broadcaster Wendy Mesley [was] suspended...
 for using an offensive word
 in talking about an upcoming interview in a story meeting."ⁱⁱ
 She later 'retired'.

Both apologised for their words.
 Yet both were 'cancelled'.

Rowan Atkinson, who many of us know as Mr. Bean,
 Described 'cancel culture' as the
 "digital equivalent of the medieval mob
 roaming the streets looking for someone to burn".ⁱⁱⁱ

Most of us would agree that people need to be held accountable
 For their words and their actions.
 And yet we can also see that cancel culture
 is fundamentally flawed.

What happened to forgiveness and redemption?

PAUSE

It may sound like we are talking about the sins of other,
 But I think we also practise a form of cancel culture
 Both here in the church and our private lives.

Think about the last time someone deeply offended you
 By their words or their actions.
 How did you respond?

If you are like most of us you decided to avoid them and ignore them.
 You may not have gone after their reputation or livelihood,
 But you erased them from your own life.

So is this the way that followers of Jesus are to behave?

Today's passage has been called by some "The Rule of Christ".
 It is a process for dealing with people with hurt us.
 It is very, very different from that practise of 'cancelling'
 That goes on in our culture and the church.

This process is first and foremost about reconciliation.

This can be seen from the broader context.

As one commentator notes:

"Preceding this passage is the parable of the lost sheep (vv. 10–14)
 with its emphasis on the joy
 that comes from recovering one who has gone astray;

following it is Jesus' saying about forgiveness
 and the parable of the Unforgiving Debtor (vv. 21–35),
 which emphasizes the need for unbounded forgiveness."^{iv}

But how about the rule itself?

It is important to realise that it is framed in familial language.
 It begins "If your brother or sister sins..."

I was complaining to my wife earlier this week
 That my siblings always bring their problems to me.
 "Why don't they go to their friends?" I asked.

Amy told me: "Their friends would only tolerate their problems so long...
 You're their brother.
 They know you have to stick with them."

From the very outset this 'Rule of Christ' assumes
 That we view each other as a family
 And that we give ruptures in these relationships
 our full attention.

So what is the process that Jesus asks of us?
 We are to do the following:

Go first directly to the other person
 and "point out the fault when the two of you are alone."
 [that's right Jesus puts the onus on the one that is hurt.
 And wisely so, those who hurt others are not always
 Aware of the pain that they have caused.]

If this is done in a humble, loving manner...
 then perhaps confession, forgiveness,
 and reconciliation may occur.

Failing that, if the barrier remains,
 a second step is to approach the offending person
 with "one or two others,"

[and he's not saying that we should bring our own friends or lawyers,
 To put pressure on the offender;
 The idea is having wise witnesses so all can]

...benefit from outside perspectives
 and avoid misunderstandings
 or later manipulation of who said what.

If the offender is recalcitrant, then it is time to "tell it to the church"
 for a public airing of the issue and resolution."^v

If this process of working through a hurt
 does not resolve the issue
 It would seem that there is place to exercise
 a discipline of exclusion:

cancelling them from the community, as it were.

Jesus tells us that if all this doesn't work
 We should treat them like any good Jew
 Would treat a "pagan or tax collector."

But think about this for a moment...

This final directive is not as clear-cut as it seems...
Treat them as pagans or tax collectors?

“Jesus at every turn extended himself graciously to such people...
even eating and drinking with them...”

What else can we conclude than that,
far from shunning them,
Jesus commands us never to give up on them,

never to stop reaching out in love to them,
always to yearn for grace to restore what has been broken.”^{vi}

This is the ‘Law of Christ’.

As I mentioned despite the clear direction of Jesus
we rarely put these words into practise.

But we need it.
We need healing in our relationships.

The world around us desperately needs it.
They need to see that there is a better way
Of dealing with past wrongs.

You may not be aware,
But children these days live in fear
Of our cancel-culture.

They know that any misstep online
May be met with an unstoppable vengeance
Making them outcasts and untouchables.

We need the rule of Christ.
The world needs it too.

But I wonder if this practise is aimed even higher
Than simply bringing greater harmony
To our communities.

Today’s passage about reconciliation
ends with a curious couple of verses
About binding and loosening.

Jesus says there is a direct connection between
What we do on earth and what is done in heaven.

As one commentator questions:

“Could it be that forgiving relationships
 have so much redemptive value
 that one's eternal destiny could be changed?”

Could the attention given to mending broken relationships
 actually result in someone,
 either an observer or the offender,
 being introduced to Kingdom life?

Could the releasing of human hurt and pain
 incurred in earthly relationships
 actually prepare one to receive the heavenly forgiveness
 and redemption of God?”

Think about the last time someone deeply offended you
 By their words or their actions.
 How did you respond?

How you might apply the rule of Christ in this relationship?

Amen.

ⁱ Marshall, Kathryn. "Kathryn Marshall: The cancel culture mob could come looking for you, too." *nationalpost*, 26 Jan. 2021, nationalpost.com/opinion/kathryn-marshall-the-cancel-culture-mob-could-come-looking-for-you-too.

ⁱⁱ Goldstein, Lorrie. "GOLDSTEIN: Cancel culture is the new name for censorship." *torontosun*, 17 June 2020, torontosun.com/opinion/columnists/goldstein-cancel-culture-is-the-new-name-for-censorship.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sky. "Rowan Atkinson: Cancel culture is like 'medieval mob looking for someone to burn'" *Sky News*, 6 Jan. 2021, news.sky.com/story/rowan-atkinson-cancel-culture-is-like-medieval-mob-looking-for-someone-to-burn-12180007.

^{iv} Reddish, M. G. (2011). Exegetical Perspective on Matthew 18:15–20. In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A* (Vol. 4, p. 49). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

^v Hambrick-Stowe, C. (2011). Theological Perspective on Matthew 18:15–20. In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A* (Vol. 4, p. 46). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

^{vi} Hambrick-Stowe, C. (2011). [Theological Perspective on Matthew 18:15–20](#). In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A* (Vol. 4, p. 48). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.