

*The New Testament knows nothing of any regularly repeated confession of sins, as though the whole drama of salvation had always to begin all over again. Life is seen as a single whole, which, with all its obedience and all its failures, all its actions and all its experiences, is devoted either to God or to everything else under the sun, and is thus as a whole either "righteousness" or "sin." Failures need not so much to be forgiven as to be recognized and healed. We must learn again and again to walk in the Spirit by which we already live (Gal 5:25) Eduard Schweizer in *The Good News according to Matthew*.*

Does it sound pretty straight forward?: "If someone sins against you, go tell them." HA! Have you ever tried it? What kinds of "sin" are we talking about? stealing from us? Or lying to us? Or gossip, and talking behind our back? Giving others preferential treatment over us? Or just not caring for us as much as we wanted? mooching off us; not carrying their load? As soon as we start talking about sin, we are not simply talking about people who disappoint us or hurt our feelings; we are talking about right and wrong and judgment, and that brings God into it and that puts a whole layer of weightiness.

Have you ever had someone come to you to talk about a sin? Or even a disappointment? Or a concern? Or a hurt? Or anger? What happened to your body at that moment? How did you respond? Research tells us what most of us know already: As soon as someone expresses any kind of disappointment in us, our brain perceives this as a threat, and the part of our brain called the amygdala, w/o any thought at all, moves into Fight/flight defensive mode. How defensive we feel depends on the relationship, and how the concern is presented to us. Very easily our core identity is touched, which does not want to be told it is incompetent, stupid, punishable. It usually doesn't go too well. You know how it goes:

You didn't do the dishes!

Oh ya, well let's talk about how many times you have left the dishes in the sink.

You interrupted me!

Oh ya, well, you never stop talking.....

Tit for tat. We know it.

But maybe we don't really have to worry that much, for as much as it feels pretty bad to have someone come to us, it doesn't actually happen that much, because the first thing that most of us do when someone sins against us (or we THINK they have sinned against us) is to NOT go to them; we go to someone else, to complain, to vent, maybe to "check our perceptions" but more likely to get them on our side, so that we can feel ok about our anger and hurt. It is called "triangling", and we have all done it. It is psychological version of the law of physics: for every action there is an equal and reaction: when things get tough between me and George, I can calm myself if I talk to Joan, who will affirm me. If I can get someone else to

agree with me that George is SO SO out of line, this makes me feel better. I calm down. Of course, it doesn't help anything between me and George, but . . .

I went to a workshop last year called "Difficult Conversations", as part of training in conflict management. The first question the teacher asked was: "What do you want people to do when you disappoint them?" And she wrote our responses up on the board: we wanted people to come to us, to tell us, to be honest, and open. And then she proceeded to challenge us over and over again: really? Wouldn't we rather prefer that people just forgive and forget and let it go? It is hard work when someone comes to us!

Into all this, Matthew gospel man says: "GO." I know people who have tried it: sincere, gentle, Christians who have felt it was important to live the gospel. And after a few disasters with defensiveness, they have given up. It just made things worse! Better to shut up/suffer/keep one's concerns to oneself! And some people can do that; they can simply let it go. But it depends on how serious it is, and how important the relationship is, and there is another risk in that. Leviticus 19:17 instructs us about the risk, which is: "hating someone in your heart" : **resentment**. **So what is a person to do?** When caught between a rock and a hard place? The rock is resentment about the offense, and the hard place is the very predictable defensiveness that seems to be so very human, which only makes things worse. **WHAT IS A PERSON TO DO?** (Note that Matthew includes this defensiveness in his scenario: the likelihood that the person will not be able to hear). **Another question:** have you ever experienced a fault pointed out so lovingly that no shame attached? No "loss of face?" No need for defensiveness? Have you ever had someone say to you something like: "Cathy, I love you very very much, and I really value our relationship, and there is nothing that is ever going to change that, and this thing that you did was very wrong." Could you reach out and put your arms around that person and say THANKYOU SO MUCH FOR being honest with me and TELLING ME. If you can imagine such a situation (or have known such a situation) , what was it that allowed that conversation to take place and that relationship to be strengthened rather than weakened?

This would be a conversation that has one very very strong hand extended in welcome and one (smaller, perhaps?) in STOP. Some behaviour needs to stop, but we want relationship to continue.

I have included in your bulletins some guidelines (Rules of civility) that can help minimize the defensiveness. When we go to someone, it is far better if we can talk about a very specific behaviour rather than talk about their whole character and personality. It's better if we can say "when you borrowed my book and returned it with the pages all bent I felt a little used" rather than saying "you are such an inconsiderate person." There are "tips" we can learn, rules of civility that really help have this kind of conversation.

These "rules of civility" can be such a help. They can come as such a relief when people are being torn apart by nastiness and resentment. I taught them to a congregation. I hung

them on my fridge. I taught them to my children. I have rehearsed them over and over and over again. They have been such a gift.

But I have also learned something else. They are not enough. Not unless we have, somewhere in our life, a place where we feel totally safe, a place where a voice speaks with consistent love and compassion saying something like this: "there is nothing that you can ever do or say that will make you UNWORTHY TO BE ALIVE ON THIS EARTH." If we don't have that voice, that place, then we are always going to be fighting; we are always going to be defensive, and those helpful conversations that aim to improve us, or improve our relationships, or deal with difficulties and anger and hurtful behaviours, they are not going to have the corrective effect. They are not going to make things better.

There are some amazing people who are able to be that voice for those around them: compassionate, truthful, matter of fact about our limitations, encouraging and accepting. Some of us have been fortunate to be married to one, or raised by one, of friends with one, and that is something for which to give thanks. I am going to suggest that the most reliable source of that voice is the living person of Christ. Every human being gets defensive, and has their issues. But Christ comes to us with no ego to defend, no point to prove. Christ comes to us, looks us in the eye, and says something like "You really failed royally there, and I love you."

And that brings us to the intriguing words of NT scholar Eduard Schweizer, who says that sin is not so much about specific things we do/don't do, the variety of ways we can fall down and fail and hurt and screw up, but sin is really about who we trust; to whom we turn, to whom we are devoted. If we are devoted to Christ, if we return again and again to the One who has no ego to defend, then we will be reminded over and over again that we are beloved, and *we will receive a correction that does not threaten our identity*. We will receive correction infused with grace.

Sin is more about what direction we choose: away or towards Christ; towards or away from truth and love. SIN is not so much about the individual failings, but WHAT WE DO WITH THEM/ HOW WE HOLD THEM. THE REAL question is: who/what do we let define us? SIN is to let a failure define us, rather than CHRIST. Do we prefer the ego of our own making, or are we willing to trust ourselves to a love we neither create nor control, but only receive, in its searing holiness?

So this instruction "GO": maybe is not so much about going to someone with a difficult agenda. Maybe it is more about going to them to remind them about "the place", the gift, in which we are all held. "Thus we learn, again and again, to walk in the Spirit in which we already live." We learn to listen to our brothers and sisters, and how they experience us. We learn to take responsibility. We learn to live as forgiven people rather than the world of blame. We learn to walk in grace.

Offered to the congregation of MacNab St Presbyterian Church, Hamilton, ON by Cathy Stewart