

Can We Talk?

Shepherd's Grace Church

September 7, 2014

Then Jesus said, if any member of the church sins against you, go to that person and point out their fault in private. If that person listens to you, then you have regained that one. If the person does not listen to you, then take one or two members of the church and go to that person so that each word of your conversation might have the witness of 2 or 3 persons as evidence. If the person still will not listen, then tell the church. If the person will not listen, even to the church, then let that person be as a gentile or a tax collector to you!

Truly, I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and what you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you that if any two of you agree to something on earth and ask for it in my name, my Father in heaven will do it for you. For wherever two or more are gathered in my name, I Am there also! (Matt. 18: 15-20) (Also read Romans 13: 8-14)

Today, we take on a difficult topic; the topic of sin. We do not have much problem understanding sin against God. We understand that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God! (Rom. 3) We accept and recognize that God has given us direction in the Bible about how we are to behave in order to be in a right relationship with God. We struggle with the details of all that God requires of us. In the "Hebrew Bible" God has given us 613 commandments and the violation of any of these is sin. Any violation makes us unworthy to be in God's presence. To this end, there is no degree in "sin". The violation of any of the commandments is sufficient to cause God to turn away from us!

In the world, we have degrees of offense. We have regulations determining the punishment for offenses committed against society. We list those offenses and even put them on a grid so that it is easily defined, that which is the most severe and that which is the least. We agree that murder is among the most severe and as such, deserves among the most severe punishment. Rape is almost as heinous and as such warrants almost as severe a punishment. Abuse of a child by a parent, while equally as brutal as rape is treated with a different level of severity, however, because the world thinks of children and women as property of the father or husband and the law has not changed to reflect our growing understanding that all people are equal and entitled to equal protection under the law.

The point is that in the world, degrees are not always equitable. The world is not perfect and neither are the world's interpretations of what should be the law. God, however is not bound by the righteousness of the world. God's is perfectly righteous and God judges against a standard that is God's own. God's ways are not our ways and as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are God's ways above ours!" (Isaiah 55) God's ways cannot tolerate sin and God's punishment is death. "The wages of sin is death!" (Rom. 5) There is and can be no other suitable punishment for an offense against God!

Just as there is no understanding of God's ways of punishing sin, there is also no understanding of what happens next in our relationship with God! "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only son

that whosoever should believe in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For indeed, the Son of Man did not come into the world to judge the world but to redeem it!" (John 3: 16-17) God's judgment and punishment are irrevocable. There is no degree of sin in God's sight and those who sin must die, however God gives Grace that allows for a new understanding of that death.

When God sent God's son, death was defeated, and overcome so that we could die to our old selves and be made new in Christ (Rom. 6) for Jesus took on the sin of the whole world so that our sin could be forgiven and we could be redeemed as God promised! Sin in God's eyes therefore, has been defeated and we have been restored to right relationship if we are willing to accept Jesus as our savior and redeemer! "That salvation is nearer to us now than it ever has been," Paul says in Romans 13. It is happening as the Kingdom of Heaven comes near. The question then becomes, "How will we respond?" How will we receive the gift of reconciliation God has given in Jesus Christ? How will we live in the world?

That is the question Jesus addresses this morning. He knows we are redeemed in God's sight. He knows His mission will accomplish that. What He wants to make known is that we have a greater responsibility to one another because of what He does for us. "Owe no one anything except to love one another," Paul says. (Rom. 13: *) Adultery, murder, rape; these crimes of the world can all be avoided if you will "Love your neighbor!" Love of one another overcomes the lust, the anger the bitterness of the world! It is that love that motivates Jesus to give instruction today! It is also that love that causes us to struggle so severely with that instruction!

If you look at last week's bulletin, you will notice the title for this week's sermon. I chose the title, "*Can We Talk*," before the events of this week. The reason I tell you this is because this week Joan Rivers died. Rivers was a ground breaking comedian in the '60's who pioneered women in stand-up comedy. I tried to find some clips of Rivers stand-up routines to show in service or share here and I looked at a number of them. As I listened, I was reminded of why Rivers was ground breaking. She was vulgar and uncouth and unsuitable for listening. The topics she chose to highlight her comedic acumen were wholly inappropriate and her language was unrepeatable. Needless to say, you will not be hearing any of her routine here but you will be hearing her famous catch phrase. "Can we Talk?" From topic to topic this was Rivers transition. I do want to give her credit this morning because over and over again, I have to wonder, "Can we talk?"

I ask the question today because I genuinely want to know the answer. In this world of political correctness, in this age of guarded and beguiling language is it possible to talk...to really talk to someone; to have an honest discussion even if two parties disagree. I believe it should be, I believe it must be in order for us as Christians to truly "Love one another!" I believe the conversation matters and that Jesus gives us a formula today for having that conversation which is actionable and available. Let's try and figure it out. *Can We Talk?*

In order to talk we must first understand a little of the context of Jesus instruction today. At the first part of chapter 18, Matthew's Jesus finds disagreement in the church! The question is about which of the disciples will be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Many point to their works and suggest that it

will unquestionably be them. They have earned the place and it will be theirs. Jesus, however brings a little child among them and points to the child. He says that whoever would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven must be as this little child. Works will not earn a way into the kingdom. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God! None are worthy on their own and the only way they can enter and have a place of honor is to receive that place as a little child, openly, gratefully and without question. The greatest in heaven must be the least here on earth. The greatest in heaven must be willing to go to others and get down on his or her knees and apologize for wrongs done while at the same time being willing to forgive wrongs done.

Then Jesus tells a parable about the lost sheep. He wonders with the disciples gathered what the shepherd does who recognizes that one of his sheep is missing. "Does not that shepherd leave the 99 sheep to go and find the missing one? The nature of the community is to be concerned with the needs of the many. Majority rules and that which offers the greatest good for the many is that which is considered. The world works...our world works on this principle. God, however goes after the one, even the one who is in the wrong and God expects us to do the same. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God but all are our neighbors and are worthy of our love! They are worthy of our love because they have been created in the "Image of God!" and are precious in God's sight! Can we talk?

Can we talk about those who wrong us? Can we talk about what God intends for us to do with them? Can we talk about how God desires that we remain in relationship even with those who insult, belittle, berate us? Jesus tells us, "If a member of the church sins against you." We really need to hear this. If a member of the church...if someone who is in your family of faith...if someone who has professed his or her belief in Jesus...if someone who seeks salvation just like I do or you do; if that one sins against you, go and seek out that one and point out the fault. Can we talk?

We are not talking about people who have not yet received the good news of God's plan for salvation of the world. We are talking about those who know God's plan and are attempting to follow Jesus into the will of God just like we are. We are talking about people we should be able to talk to. We are talking about people who are persecuted for their faith just as we are. We are talking about people who seek to "love their neighbor" just as we do! Can we talk to them? Can we talk?

The reality is that today we do not seem to be able to talk. We try to step around or go behind others who have different opinions than we do! We get uncomfortable if we have to defend something we said or did because we do not like to be second guessed or questioned. We after all...we are the ones who have the best interest of the church at heart. We are the ones who know what is best so when someone questions us or finds fault with us, we want to assume that it is the "other" who is at fault! We cannot talk because we cannot listen! We cannot listen because we have already made up our mind that the "other" is wrong. Can we talk?

If we can open our mind to the possibility that the "other" might have something to say, perhaps we can summon the courage to go and engage that person in conversation. It is difficult to imagine a private conversation with someone whom we do not like but perhaps we can realize that there just might be something to say...or dare I say learn. Perhaps we can make ourselves like the little child who

approaches the world with a sense of wonder and amazement and is willing to learn from everything and everyone!

To confront someone who thinks in a way different from us, we must be willing to listen to what that person has to say and to truly listen, we must be confident of why we believe what we believe. Frequently, in the 21st century world we do not know why we believe what we believe. We have been taught that there is no universal truth, that everyone has a right to their own opinion and that their opinion is as valid as ours. We have been taught more completely however that our opinion does not need to be informed, that it does not have to be based in fact but only in what we think. We have been told that we can do whatever is right in our own sight (Judges) and that there is no point of view more valid than ours. To truly listen, we must know why we believe what we believe. Can we talk?

If we can talk, we can think together that we are a generation of faithful lost in our own opinion and not in the commands given by God. We are a generation that does not know the Bible and that does not know why we believe what we believe! We are a generation standing on the quicksand of a world that has no perspective rooted in fact and because of that our facts shift as a matter of convenience. Can we talk? Can we talk about why we feel wronged? Can we talk about why we feel put upon by others? It is because we do not know why we believe what we believe! It is because we believe in the moment and not in the future! It is because we believe in ourselves as the message of Jesus and not in the truth of the message as it is given! Can we talk?

Can we engage in a conversation with someone who thinks differently than we do? Can we be open to their understanding and invite them to be open to ours? Can we recognize that even if they are not open to our understandings, we can and perhaps should be open to theirs? Recently, I engaged a person who professed to be a Christian in a private conversation on Facebook. The conversation was about men's rights regarding abortion. The person was female and was insistent that because I was a man, I could and should have no opinion on the matter of abortion. She was taking the community line; "It is the woman's body and she alone has the right to make decisions about it."

After she expressed her opinion, I agreed with her. I do believe women have not only the right but also the responsibility for their bodies. Where we departed in our thinking was with regard to the question of when this person, (in this case, the woman) has the right. The person who was challenging me suggested that the right exists in perpetuity. In other words, it exists for the woman forever and there can be no exceptions!

I wanted to argue that a woman has the absolute right to make all decisions about her body without input from anyone else before the woman becomes pregnant. The woman does and should have an absolute right to say no, and "No means NO!" No always and irrevocably means no and that is always the woman's choice. Her freedom to choose is and can never be revoked or reversed or reacted to in a violent and forceful way. That is the woman's right to choose!

The person I was debating with had no problem with that part of my argument. What came next however was where our difference was determined. I went on to argue that the woman's rights to choice end when they begin to affect the rights of others to life. I made this point first through the

fundamental precepts of the nation we live in. The *Declaration of Independence* makes clear that all people are endowed by their creator with the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I argued, in other words that life begins at conception and that the woman's right to choose must from that point forward consider the rights of the other person for whom she is now making decisions. That person has no voice in this world other than hers and that person depends upon her to look after his/her best interests.

I further argued that the rights of the newly created individual are intended to be protected by both of that person's co-creators. We live in a society where the statistics indicate that nearly half of all births in the United States are births outside of marriage. I am not arguing here the merits of pre-marital sex or the consequences that come from that decision. I am arguing that because children are born outside of the "traditional" family, they are denied the legal protection the family affords. When a couple is married in the eyes of the state, certain rights, the rights to safeguard the children fall equally to both parents. Outside of that "legal and traditional" bond, the rights of children are assumed to fall to the mother. Statistics further indicate that children survive best, succeed best, and thrive best with the full support of a family. Decisions about "life and liberty" should not and cannot be made in a vacuum. They must be made in the light of conversation and consideration of all the possibilities available. My argument here was not for the child but for the father as an advocate for the rights of the child as well!

My opponent in this debate countered with two questions. The first, "How do you know life begins at conception?" The second, "Why do you assume a man wants to be involved after 'getting what he wants' from the woman?" Remember, I said the woman is a Christian. I asked and she affirmed that claim before we started the debate. The reason I asked, the reason Jesus makes the point this morning are one and the same. If a person is a member of the church, that person is held, not to the standards of the world, but to the standards of God! The world can exist in a state of "moral ambiguity" where we all do what is right in our own sight but Christians should harbor no such confusion. God's word should be our guide! When a member of the church sins against you, you should seek out that person.

My opponent was a member of the church so I referred her to the word of the church. I used the scripture from Jeremiah 2 "I formed you in the womb and I knitted you. Before you were born, I knew you!" For a Christian, for a member of the church, this argument demonstrates when life begins. For a person of the world it is not a valid authority. Science and Technology guide their thinking though proper use of science invites the same conclusion! The woman conceded the point fairly quickly however, she did so only to get to her second question. Why do you assume the man wants to be involved?

I have deeply personal reasons for believing men want to be involved in the lives of their children but I did not want to make this a personal argument. In addition to my personal reasons, I also hold public and communal beliefs. Jesus sends us to find those who have broken their relationships with us. He wants, invites us to restore those relationships by being in conversation with the "other." In conversation we have the possibility for transformation. In community, everyone is welcome. People who know nothing about us are invited to come, to share, to participate, to be part of something. When they become part of something, they cease to become community. They become communion, they

become part of the body, they become united with. To be Christian is to move beyond community to communion. That is why it is so important to seek out those with differences. Those differences are a part of who we are! Those differences are important!

To involve the man, to invite the man is to recognize that the man is involved. The life God promises in abundance (John 10: 10) could not be possible without communion. These are not two disinterested parties. They are part of something together. We assume in our society that all people are eager to abrogate their responsibility for their actions; that they will do all they can to avoid what they need to care for. Jesus wants to suggest to us this morning that that is not always the case. Some are willing to listen, to accept to acknowledge a purpose beyond them and their own dreams. To involve the man in decisions regarding the future of life, a life he also is responsible for is to invite that acknowledgement and to hope for a response to that life!

As the woman and I had the conversation, she acknowledged that it would be better for men to be more involved in the responsibility for their children. She made the point that this had not been her experience and I had to agree. My question though is, "are men excused because they do not accept responsibility or do they not accept responsibility because they are excused?" We let men off the hook in our society when we lower our standards of expectation. The angel of the Lord refused to let Joseph off the hook in Matthew's gospel. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife and raise the child as your own!" (Matt. 1) Sometimes we let men run from their fear. God calls men to stand up to their fear, to accept the situations they are part of and to recognize in those situations the potential for God to be a partner in their lives!

In the end, I did not change the woman's mind but I did invite her into a deeper understanding of the issue that at first divided us. We parted as people who are able to have an open and honest discussion regarding difficult issues. In the end, it is the conversation that matters. We are the church! We are the place where difficult issues can and should be discussed because we have a discipline, a standard in God's word which will guide us. We can bring others into our conversation. We can bring the whole church into our conversation but in the end we are guided by God's word.

What we hold bound on earth will be bound in heaven according to God's word. God's word is not a word of judgment but a word of reconciliation. If we bind ourselves to our judgments, God will ultimately bind us to those judgments. If we fail to forgive and find the lost, we will be lost in eternity. If on the other hand, we look for the opportunity to understand one another, to become communion and not just community, we will share that communion throughout eternity. If we agree to be open to one another, to "Love one another" then we can agree to live with one another as a vision for a world broken, beaten and battered. If we do not seek out our brothers and sisters, we cannot seek out others who have not yet heard the good news...so I ask you today, in the midst of a sinful and struggling world, in a place where we have all come together to hear the word of God, "Can we talk?" Amen!