

Matthew 18: A Suggested Guide to Living in Community

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We believe the Quaker form of worship and corporate decision making require us to be in community. Friends have found, over the centuries, that in community we are enabled to more fully experience the presence of God. Our meetings can be the “laboratories” (to use Bill Kreidler’s metaphor¹) in which we are provided with (often unsought) opportunities to learn how to live with others, what blocks our love, what needs to be changed, and how we put into practice what we are learning inwardly from God. Joined in community it seems that we may be able to offer a more powerful witness to the world. Perhaps through our interactions with others—within the faith community and outside in the larger society—we may demonstrate an alternative way of living. “Let our lives preach”, Friends are fond of saying.

But being with other humans doesn’t always run smoothly. We may disagree over what color to paint the walls, how to discipline children, the appropriateness of a given message in meeting for worship, what names to call the Divine, or any of a host of large and small things. Interactions with others may expose our personal gifts and foibles. People may bring strengths, weaknesses, and old experiences to any interaction, which, if these things are unexamined, can perhaps influence the interactions with others.

Fortunately, we have found that human beings do not need to feel left to flounder around to figure out alone, or even as a group, how to deal with our humanness. The eighteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew in the Bible is understood by us to report some suggestions that Jesus gave to his disciples on how to get along with each other in community. Although often couched in parables, one way of interpreting this chapter helps these suggestions to be understood in a simple, straightforward way that is suffused with love. It is also perhaps the most difficult thing we have ever tried to live into. Each time we resist moving forward, though, we can pray for willingness. Our intention, in spite of the many times we forget or fail, remains: to be open to Divine Love. We can ask for help in taking each step along the way.

Traditionally verses 15 through 18 have been taken alone and used as a process for disciplining an individual who has done something contrary to the church’s understanding of acceptable behavior.² It is our experience, however, that we have found it helpful to look at the entire chapter not only in terms of the behavior of individuals within the meeting community, but of relationships among us. If we jump immediately to verses 15-18 without doing all the earlier preparative work, it becomes too often a weapon used in anger rather than a plea for help and repentance.

As we have interpreted it, there seem to be five parts to the process we find in Matthew 18, and several steps within some of these parts. Skipping any of them sabotages the effort because it tends to short circuit the flow of Divine Love. It is important to resist the temptation to jump directly to the fourth part.

It may come as a surprise to some that there is no single, definitive Bible. There are a multitude of fragments and versions, none of which are in the original language spoken by Jesus. Over the centuries various translations have been written, attempting to make the message and ideas accessible to a variety of readers. Therefore we read several translations and selected passages that seem to express most clearly what it seems to us Jesus was trying to explain. Obviously this is perilous work. We are not a Biblical scholars and do not read Latin or Greek (but then, neither did Jesus). The following translations have been

¹ William Kreidler, keynote address to an FGC Quaker Gathering, July 1989, reprinted in Robert Leuze, *Each of Us Inevitable* (FLGBTQC, 2003).

²See for example, the excellent book by Marlin Jeschke, *Discipling in the Church: Recovering a Ministry of the Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Scottsdale, Penna.: Herald Press, 1988).

drawn upon in this pamphlet. Each is followed by an abbreviation that will be used to identify quotations so that readers will be able to identify the sources if they so desire. Bible translations mentioned or used are: Contemporary English Version, by American Bible Society (CEV); the inclusive new testament, by Priests for Equality (int); King James Version (KJV); New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Additional information about these four translations is given at the end of this pamphlet.

We have come to understand the first part of the suggestions Jesus made to his disciples as having to do with becoming like little children. It reads:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. (Matt. 18:1-5 NRSV)

Here were the disciples jostling for position, probably a bit jealous and resentful of each other, perhaps engaging in spiritual competition. What is it about being a child that Jesus is holding up to them? He specifies one attribute: humility. So in my experience the very first step in resolving meeting conflicts or tension between two individuals is for me to become humble—like a little child. Sometimes it seems that our society has studied dysfunctional families so minutely that this metaphor of a child has almost lost meaning for people today. But I think that healthy children know they do not have all the answers. They trust. They are teachable. Healthy children are innocent, open, receptive, obedient, expectant, curious, hopeful, and joyful. Such children, at least for the purpose of my effort to understand these verses, yield trustingly to love and higher wisdom. The opposite, the “adult” behaviors that I interpret Jesus asking me to move beyond, include such things as being skeptical, cynical, guarded, defensive, angry, weary, fearful, or discouraged.

The first step in healing relationships and in building a deeper faith community, in my own personal experience (and I am not laying this on anyone else), is to become as a little child. I, myself, must become humble, trusting, open, hopeful, teachable, and obedient to God. It implies that there are things I need to learn—about myself as well as about the situation.

In addition to me becoming humble, I feel that I am asked to regard the other person as a little child. In healthy situations little children are taken for who they are, not projections of who I might think they ought to be. They are regarded with tender care and forbearance. I interpret this to mean that I am not asked to humble myself before the other person, as much as before God. In my experience, I am invited to view both myself and the other person as folks who don't have many of the answers but might listen together, and thus experience together the kingdom of heaven.

This brings us the second part, having to do with the way I treat other people, and the creation of stumbling blocks. Some of the language took us quite a while to understand, and even now I think it may need some interpretation. Jesus is quoted as saying:

"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be

better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!" (Matt. 18:6-7, NRSV)

I interpret this to suggest that I am asked to see as a little child the person I find irritating. Behind the effort to control, does fear lurk? Behind the pre-emptive distancing, is there unhealed pain? If I react to the provocation of the outward behavior, rather than listening carefully for the little child within, do I unwittingly create stumbling blocks that make it difficult for the person to be received into the community? Does my action of pointing out to others the failures of this person create additional hurdles for me, for anyone who listens to my complaints, and for the person? It seems to me that Jesus uses strong language to describe the results of making it more difficult for another person to be open to God's love as mediated through the community and through me.

The King James Version translates "stumbling blocks" as "offenses", while the Contemporary English Version calls them "sin". The latter words it this way:

"The world is in trouble because of the way it causes people to sin. There will always be something to cause people to sin, but anyone who does this will be in for trouble." (Matt. 18: 7, CEV)

Here, as in other passages, I might ask myself if this is a description of my community in distress, rather than a prescription of how God is going to punish us. It is my experience (and yours may be different) that when untended wounds or unexamined feelings lead me (or someone else) to react to provocation in ways that exacerbate rather than heal, the community indeed is "in for trouble", and so am I.

On the other hand, while Jesus is inviting me to acknowledge my own part he is not asking me to take responsibility for fixing everything. Sin, offenses, stumbling blocks will come. I interpret this to be an acceptance of the fact that I am human, and so are most of the rest of the people with whom I come into contact. One theory is that it is inevitable that people hurt one another.³ But I interpret the suggestion to be that it might be helpful if each person is vigilant over his or her *own* behaviors and hidden motivations so that all strive to keep their motives and actions pure and childlike. This passage seems to suggest that it would be helpful if each person tries to pay attention and not set up stumbling blocks for others.

I understand that Jesus goes on to describe the relationship between God and this person that I have find so annoying:

"See to it that you never despise one of these little ones; for I swear that their angels in heaven are continually in the presence of my Abba God." (Matt. 18:10-11 int)

I understand this to mean that I am not just to see their fear or pain, I am to recognize that God loves them, and they are very important to God. Perhaps one way to rephrase the "presence" of "their angels", for those who find such imagery problematical, is to imagine God being acutely aware of the importance of these people, and that God cares very much what happens to them. I understand that Jesus tries to underscore this with a little parable.

"What do you think? Suppose a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them strays away—won't the shepherd leave the ninety-nine on the hillside and go in search of the stray? If the shepherd finds it, the truth is, there is more joy over the one found than over the ninety-nine that didn't stray. In the same way, it is never the will of your Abba God in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost." (Matt. 18:12-14 int)

³ See two excellent pieces by Richard Foster on forgiveness, and its necessity because we will inevitably hurt one another. Hurting is not a sign of failure of community; the critical point is how we deal with it. Richard Foster, "The Agony and the Ecstasy", *Faith at Work* (May/June 1987). See also, Richard Foster, "Petitionary Prayer", in *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 187-88.

This “little one”, this “lost sheep”, for whose welfare I think that Jesus is so tenderly concerned, is that person I dislike in meeting. But I also understand that this “little one”, this “lost sheep”, is also me with my shortcomings. I believe that God seeks to have both of us reconciled and held together in God’s loving embrace (and there is no need to confuse this metaphorical way of writing with an anthropomorphic god). I think it is helpful if we are both able to open ourselves to God’s grace, which, in my experience, can perhaps shift us into a place of love that recognizes we are both children of “Abba God”—both sheep belonging to the same Shepherd. “Abba” is a word that means Daddy or Papa—someone who is familiar and beloved and personal. One way that I have found helps me to open myself to Divine Love is to pray for that person every time he or she crosses my mind, trailing wisps of resentment: “God, give _____ what he needs to become whole and healed, filled with thy grace and joy.” As social beings we are constantly bumping up against each other with our opposing needs, viewpoints and issues. It is almost impossible to go through life without inadvertently or deliberately doing harm to others by our actions or words. We are both perpetrators and victims of slights, poor judgments, prejudices, oversights, or mistakes. How we deal with these can color our lives and the lives of others.

It is interesting that in the parallel account of this parable in Luke, and there are various places in the new testament that repeat versions of the same stories or sayings, the text reads not “If the shepherd finds it,” but “when” he finds the lost sheep.⁴ Luke couples his telling with the parable of the found coin and the forgiving father to (I think) illustrate God’s amazing grace. It seems to me that Matthew is using it to describe God’s unconditional love in the context of bringing and holding the flock together. The outward reality I have observed is that sometimes a “sheep” refuses to be “found”. But it seems to me that I am called to do my part toward bringing the lost one back, or coming back myself—neither less nor more than just my own piece of the work.

So the first two parts of our understanding of Jesus’ suggestions in Matthew 18 have to do with seeing myself and the other person as little children, siblings in the same family, both of us loved extravagantly and unconditionally. Seeing myself as if I was a child involves humility and my acceptance of divine love. I think that seeing the other as a child involves recognizing that God loves him, too. I am called to be tender with his frailties and not make things more difficult for him (or her) through judgmentalism. It is possible that this person with whom I am in conflict may be the sibling who can set me free from my own inward burdens. I believe that this passage suggests that I am to welcome her, on behalf of Christ, who (I think) longs for us to be welcomed together into his love.

There is more, there are 3 more parts. But this gives an idea of both a way to “read” a biblical section and the instructions for resolving differences and difficulties within a faith community.

⁴Luke 15:3-7.