

**When Friendship Breaks Down:
Conflict, Loss, Hurt and Disappointment in Friendship**
Matthew 18: 15-20 Tim Dickau February 4th, 2018

Disappointing Experiences

Consider these scenarios about friendship. You develop a really close friendship that is very nurturing for your soul. However, one day she tells you she is moving across the country for a new job. You pledge to stay in touch, and you do, for awhile, but the conversations become less frequent, less personal until you settle on cards or texts for birthday and Christmas.

Number 2. You become part of a new group or community looking to find friends and you keep hoping that someone will invite you out for coffee or dinner, but you keep waiting and waiting. You wonder if you can keep hanging in there.

Scenario 3. You are good friends with your brother, a friendship that has spanned the years, decades of your life. You don't always agree or get along famously, but you can count on him in ways that root your life. Then your mother dies and your brother vehemently disagrees with how the will was set up. You try to talk to him but he's so angry he won't discuss it. You think he'll get over it but one year follows another until the communication dwindles to the occasional text.

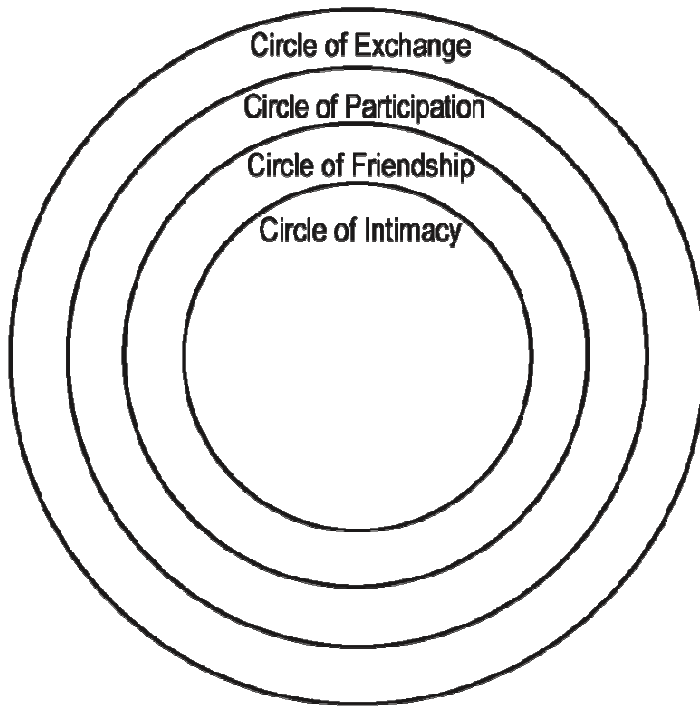
Do any of these disappointments ring a bell or resonate with you? They are all stories that come from our community here at Grandivew. During this Epiphany season, we've been exploring friendship – with God and others. Though friendship is nice in theory, and quite delightful when things are going well, friendship can also be full of disappointment and hurt. At times it can feel like you are in a friendship desert. Have you been there?

What guidance can we find in Scripture to aid us in journeying through these disappointments? Why is it important that we do work our way through these challenges? What happens if we don't? As a peak ahead to where we are going, I think that is vital – absolutely vital - that we do work through these disappointments and I'll tell you why later on.

If there are disappointments around friendship that you carry, I want to invite you to name them to yourself now. As you listen today, I am going to invite you to move somewhere in this specific disappointment you are holding.

Friendship Circles






When it comes to our relationships, most of us probably have a set of relationships that looks something like this:



We might name these circles differently. Community developer, Dave Andrews, who visited our community some years ago, used the titles companions, co-hort, and collaborators to describe those first three inner circles. Jesus' own relationships were configured something like this: he had an inner circle of friendship among the disciples, James and John among the 12, people like Lazarus, Mary and Martha – his inner circle. Then the 12 formed another circle, a close co-hort working along side Jesus. Luke describes another circle of the 70 whom he sent out part way through his public life that formed a circle of collaboration, some of whom saw him resurrected from the dead. Then there were all the people whom Jesus healed or impacted in a significant way, like the woman who washed Jesus' feet in Simon's house. Finally, there were all the people who met him or heard him speak.

I bring these circles of friendship up this morning because I think they help us understand disappointment in relationships better. First, in an age of "Facebook", we can have plenty of "friends" but the reality is that many of these friends are no where near our inner circle.

MODERN FRIENDSHIP

					
Would take a bullet for you.					
Would create a hashtag for you, post-bullet.		X			
Would immediately notify others that they had witnessed you taking a bullet.	X	X			
Would take artsy photo of blood from bullet wound pooling under you using Kelvin filter and tag "murdergram."					X
Would check to see compatibility with your current job just in case bullet has dire consequences.			X		
Would create custom board in your name titled "Recipes <u>you</u> liked."				X	
Would say how much they missed you if you died.	X	X	X	X	X

Many of these "friends" are more likely collaborators or acquaintances. We may have some intimate moments with them, but we don't track closely with each other's lives. If one of us moves, it's unlikely we will stay in touch. The truth is that we won't be best friends with everyone we know. It's impossible. Even in a relatively small community even ours, or even in some larger families, certain people move into that inner circle of intimacy but not everyone. If we expect to be best friends with everyone, we aren't being realistic. I'll say more about expectations in a moment because they are so connected to disappointment.

Secondly, one thing to learn from Jesus' own life is that while he wasn't best friends with everyone, he was very present to the people he was with, paying attention to the details of their lives, offering and receiving gifts in the encounter, showing concern and love. We don't have to be best friends to offer each other the gift of love and care. Jesus shared meaningful relationships with many, many people. Indeed, what makes Jesus' vision for humanity so transforming and hopeful is his call to love not just our friends but our enemies. Every human encounter has potential for great good.

Thirdly, I presented this diagram because it is those relationships in the two inner circles that usually bring us the most joy, AND the most disappointment. One reason for that is that we have higher expectations of people in those circles.



Expectations and Disappointment

So, let's talk about expectations, or what are often "unspoken expectations". I was chatting with someone about unspoken expectations last week and their response was "oh, you just described my family".

Now, some expectations of friendships are good and reasonable. It's good and reasonable to expect that our friends will respond when we call and that we will respond when they call us. Reciprocity – give and take – is a reasonable expectation of friendship.

The trouble usually comes when we have unspoken and mismatched expectations of each other. If I expect you to respond to my call or e-mail or text by the next day and you consistently respond after a week, we've got a problem. I'm going to be continually disappointed. That's why it's so important to discuss expectations in relationships. When you are disappointed, do you take the effort to talk about those expectations? Are you open to adjusting your expectations if they don't match another person's limits or intentions? Or do you just live with resentment and anger? These are important questions to answer if we are going to have healthy friendships and relationships.

Conflicts that leave Wounds

But even when we have spoken and matched expectations, we can still disappoint one another. In a myriad of ways. I don't need to describe all the ways we can disappoint each other. I will point out here, as Jesus said, that it's easier to see the speck of wrong in our friend's actions and miss the plank of failure to be a good friend to others in our own.

What do we do when someone disappoints us? Let's turn now to the passage that was read for us. This teaching comes in the context of a number of stories about restoration – which is part of what most people expected someone claiming to be Messiah to do. So we have these stories of children who instead of being turned away receive a welcome from Jesus and a warning for any adult who would ignore or exploit the "little ones". And you have the stories in chapter 19 where Jesus restores marriages and closes the gap between the rich and poor by softening the hearts of spouses and exposing the hardened hearts of the rich ruler. Jesus comes to restore and reconcile. Restoration is the work and way of God in the world.

This passage in chapter 18 is also about restoration – restoration of relationships. Jesus offers a process of how to seek restoration when someone disappoints you, when someone wrongs you. I strongly believe that if we follow this process more closely, we will avoid so many pitfalls in friendships and have much healthier communities, workplaces and families. This is important – to practice!

A Process for Seeking Reconciliation (slide)

Let's look closer at this process. Step one. "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over." One of the first things to notice here is that if you are offended, you have the responsibility to go talk to the other person. You don't wait around to see if they come and ask your forgiveness. You don't just go and complain about it to your friends and then ignore the offender. You go and talk to the person who mistreated you. They may not even know what they have done. If we just followed this first step, we'd solve half of our relational problems.

I want to offer a note of encouragement. A community in which there is little or no disagreement is not always a sign of health; it may in fact be the opposite – a sign that folks don't care very much about the community or that our relationships are very, very thin. You don't work with people closely or walk closely with each other and never irritate or wound each other. (slide) British Theologian, Stuart Murray writes these wise words: *The kind of community envisaged by Jesus in his teaching on mutual admonition is a church whose members are sufficiently involved in each other's lives to notice spiritual and moral problems, and where relationships are strong enough to risk misunderstanding or offense.*

So these wrongs or disappointments are a normal part of deeper friendships or relationships. Having to talk to one another about issues is good practice. But what if you can't settle it between the two of you? Verse 16. Step 2. "If they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."

You can see that this is a process that holds the accuser as accountable as the one who is accused. Sometimes I think we resist this second step in the process of inviting others to help us work it out because we are worried we may have a part to play in the problems. So instead, we just walk away if step 1 fails. That won't do. We need to keep at these issues.

Finally this step: "If they refuse to listen to them, tell it to the gathering, the ecclesia, which would later mean the church. And then Jesus says this "And if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." This last line has often been misunderstood, I think. Jesus loved tax-collectors and sinners. He ate with them, but he called them to repent, to turn to a different way of living. It seems to me that this is what Jesus is getting at here. If someone still refuses to listen after you've gone through this whole process, you must recognize that the ball is in their corner if they want to be fully restored to the community. You've sought reconciliation but they have refused it. So they have placed themselves outside of fellowship. All you can do is keep loving them and inviting them to face up to their actions. We haven't gotten to this last step often in my time but there are some occasions. They are painful.

We have tried to follow this process as a church in situations of conflict and wrongs, most often settling the issues in either step one or two. In my first few years at the church, I had a conflict with someone that I followed this process with. I met with him, couldn't settle the issue, then asked them to invite a couple people as did I to talk together. Still didn't settle it. Brought it to church council. Eventually he left. But because we had worked through a good process, I became his pastor more after he left. And he went on to serve well in another context. There have been a handful of times in my 28 years here where we nearly imploded and had to be very deliberate in this process. I have found following this process to be great gift. This process is very good. Everyone is held accountable in it.

Verses 18-20 reveal how serious Jesus is that his followers do take up this process of reconciliation. "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

God's decision to uphold and confirm this loosing and binding of people means, as the Catholic catechism puts it: "Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God." The hope here is that Jesus offers to help us with these situations. Notice that his promise to be present "where two or three are gathered in his name" is a promise given for these very contexts where we are seeking to resolve conflict. That promise should come as both an encouragement to stick with this process, even when we don't feel like it, and a warning, that we are indeed all accountable before God.

Here's the thing: when we work through conflicts and are reconciled, we implement God's vision to reconcile all things in Christ. It's a sign of real friendship not only with each other but with God.

On the other hand, if we refuse to work through these disappointments, it's actually a sign that our friendship with each other and with God is pretty weak. Because this is what God comes in Christ to empower us to do. To be reconciled. Remember that verse from John's gospel where he says, "I no longer call you servants because servants don't know their master's business." Reconciliation is God's business. Friends of Jesus get that. So let me ask you this morning: Are you a friend of Jesus? Are you taking up his master's business of reconciliation?

Forgiveness

What completes this process of reconciliation is of course, the act of forgiveness. Forgiveness. This teaching is followed directly by the parable of the servant who is forgiven a huge debt but who won't forgive a small debt to someone else. Jesus tells that parable in response to Peter the petulant's question "how many times do I have to forgive someone?" By wanting a number of how many times he needed to forgive, Peter was missing the point. The point is that we are to become persons and communities who practice forgiveness - continuously"

Indeed, this entire process clarifies what forgiveness is and what it is not. Forgiveness is not merely an inner thing where we try to put away angry feelings for another person. Forgiveness has less to do with how we feel and more to do with the steps we take towards restoration, including inviting God to soften our hearts along the way. Jesus by the way came to renew and soften our hearts.

Why Reconciliation Matters

Why is following this process of reconciliation so important? Here's why. Jesus expected these small groups of followers he was establishing to be a sign of what it looked like when humans were renewed and restored in the image and likeness of God. Alexander Pope got it right: To err is human; to forgive is divine. When we take up this process leading to reconciliation and forgiveness in our life together -- and in our families, our workplaces, our neighborhoods, even with obnoxious drivers -- we reveal the character and action of God in the world. Quite astounding that we can do this. Of course, when we don't pursue reconciliation, when we hold resentments, bear grudges, avoid accountability, we bear witness to a very distorted humanity.

What's more, Jesus expected these gatherings of his followers, these little "ecclesia", to work together on a whole batch of fronts like lifting up the downtrodden, releasing prisoners' from their prisons, healing the sick, setting the oppressed free. Our friendships in this sense are not only valuable in themselves, they are valuable in light of God's call to work together over the long haul for God's vision of justice and shalom in the world.

That's why this is so important for churches in particular to follow this restoring process. The kingdom of God is a long-term project. We won't get very far in building for the kingdom if we don't learn how to move through our disappointments and conflicts. Let's face it; we aren't very good at this. It doesn't help that we live in a consumer age where we can always choose another friend. Living the way Jesus teaches here is very counter cultural. It is also essential, absolutely essential, if we are going to form the kind of communities that KEEP working towards the kingdom of God in the world. Part of the reason we have gotten as far as we have at Grandivew is that we have struggled to work through disappointments and forgive. That's enabled us to keep moving further down the road in areas of Refugee support, housing, employment, etc. If we want to get somewhere for the long haul, we need to practice this teaching of Jesus.

And here's the last thing I'll say about forgiveness. If you don't forgive, you are giving the offender way too much control in your life anyway. Ironically, you are held prisoner when you refuse to forgive. If you refuse to forgive, your life will shrink. However, if you forgive, your life can flower again. Forgiveness is like filling your lungs with oxygen: there's only room for you to inhale the next breath when you've just breathed out the previous one.

So let me ask you this question: How is God calling you to move somewhere this morning with the disappointments in your friendships? Standing still is not an option according to Jesus. You are either bound by these disappointments or they are loosed so that you can find life. What will you choose? Time of quiet listening