

Dancing Together

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Preaching on:
Matthew 18:15–20

Well, I'm really happy to be back here with you all after two Sundays off. Thank you so much for the break and the opportunity to spend some time with my family on vacation. We went down the shore, as we New Jerseyans say, and we were in Wildwood on the beach. We had a wonderful time together. I never realized exactly how much sand could get caught in the cracks and crevices of a one-year-old after just about five minutes on the beach, but as soon as I accepted the fact that sand and grit was our new reality, everything went just fine.

Bonnie asked me, well, hey, where do you want to go on our vacation? And I said, anywhere where we

don't have to fly will be fine with me. I've never loved flying. I don't mind being way up in the air. That's not the problem. I just don't like all of the little procedures that you have to go through to get on the plane and waiting in line constantly and, you know, the near constant snafus of cancellations and delays and the tiny little seats. I never liked any of that. But over the last few years, since the pandemic, really, something has shifted in flying. And now I'd say that the worst part about flying is other people, right? Your social media feed and your news feed, they're probably full of the same kinds of news articles and viral videos that mine are full of—showing lots of people behaving really badly on planes. The old saying goes that misery loves company, but the airlines should maybe rewrite that line: Company is misery.

I was listening to a podcast recently, and this eminent primatologist and evolutionary anthropologist made me think about this a little bit differently. He said that one of the remarkable things about human beings, when you cram a couple hundred strangers into a flying sardine can, one of the amazing things about human beings is that any of us emerges alive at the end of that flight at all. Because if you did something like that with our closest genetic relatives, chimpanzees say, they would just eat each other's faces off. It would be total pandemonium. No one would survive.

Now of course, you know, we often worry and we grieve about our tendency towards violence as a species. And that's as it should be. No violence is really acceptable or good at any level. But according to this scientist, we're angels compared to our closest animal relatives because part of being human is suppressing a deep-seated instinct for conflict and for violence. And that's fine if you're on a plane. It's good if you're on a plane. It is what allows you to survive that flight and reach your destination alive and then just—walk away. Just walk away. You never have to see those people again. You don't need to be a part of their lives. Just walk away.

But Jesus is very clear with us. And we read it in our scripture reading this morning. That kind of total suppression is a necessary evil in certain situations, but it is not ever a spiritual virtue. And it is not the way, not the way that we should behave in a healthy community. Now what Jesus is telling us this morning and what he tells us throughout the Gospel of Matthew is that when it comes to your spiritual journey, when it comes to being a Christian, you can't go it alone. We need each other. Community, being together, loving and serving one another, working together, showing grace, receiving forgiveness—This is how we Christians transform the world together. Christianity is about serving and loving others. You can't do that alone. It requires others. Christianity is about forgiving and being forgiven. You can't do that alone.

Christianity is like dancing, okay? You can dance by yourself, sure, you can. But there's something just magical about stepping out onto a dance floor with other people. And I'm sure you've felt it, moving with them, responding to them, allowing them to carry you along, to challenge you, to do that move, to bust out that move that you haven't busted out in a long time. It's possible to dance in your room by yourself. But if you're going to dance all night long, if you're going to dance until your feet hurt, if you're

going to dance until your cheeks ache because you've been smiling for so long, that is a magic, a grace, a dance that only other people can provide to you. Christianity is like dancing. We need partners. We need a party. And Christianity is like dancing because once you get out there on the dance floor, somebody almost certainly is going to step on your toes. It is inevitable. And what do you do then? Oh boy.

When somebody hurts you in community, (you know, in church, but it could also be at home, in your family, among your friends, in school, at work), you could hurt them right back, right? You stepped on my toe, I stomp on your toe. A toe for a toe, to paraphrase the Bible. Chimp justice. Jesus taught us not to do this. It's not the way. However, for most of us, it's not really a temptation, right? It's not how we do things. We have other ways of handling this kind of thing.

One of those other ways is to pretend like it didn't really happen, pretend like it didn't bother me, and then sometimes without even realizing what we're doing, we seek out revenge. We're not going to stomp on their foot. That would be too obvious. But we start secretly plotting their downfall. How can we get them? How can we expose them as the dirty foot stomper that they are? What is something they want? What's something that they love, that we can oppose or ruin without anyone ever being the wiser that we're actually acting out of malice, acting from this small and wounded place within us, acting out of a conflict that we just haven't dealt with yet?

Now, just below that is another way that we can deal with things. We can complain to everybody else. I'm not going to say anything to the guy who stepped on my toe. That might be awkward. But within an hour, everybody at the dance is going to know that he stepped on my foot and know that I think that he did it on purpose, and he didn't even say that he was sorry. And by the end of the night, he might be the only person left in the room who does not know that he stepped on my toe. How's that for dealing with conflict?

Now just below that is old reliable, the cold shoulder. I'm not going to do anything at all. I'm too mature for that, except I'm never going to dance with you again. I'm never going to dance near you again. But if you really tick me off, maybe I'll just never dance again. That'll show you. Or I'll go find somewhere else to dance all together. I've got options. There are options out there. So why be the bigger person? Why? When you can just walk away, and it's so much cleaner and easier, right?

Now just below that is the level that I think that most of us aspire to, or we think we're supposed to aspire to. And that is, just forgive and forget. It's no big deal. That's life. It was only a small fracture. It was just my pinky toe. The ER bill was mostly covered by my insurance. I only had to wear that boot for like two months. It only hurts a little bit now. Only sometimes. You know, some people don't even have feet at all. If you think about it, I'm very lucky. I should be thankful somebody stepped on my foot. I have no right to complain. I'll just let it go.

And this is actually the caricature of the Christian ethic of forgiveness—that forgiveness is just this weak and wimpy thing, that it's all about rolling over and letting yourself be abused and not seeking any kind of reconciliation or justice whatsoever. And to be very fair about it, this has been the way that forgiveness has actually been preached by some Christians in some places and at some times and still to this day. You know, for example, male clergy advising women in abusive relationships to remain in their marriages. Or state churches preaching to the poor that they must accept their lot in life, their place in the world that God has foreordained for them. Or white clergy preaching tolerance and forgiveness to black people for “historic wrongs,” right? But Jesus tells us unequivocally that this just forgive and forget, let bygones be bygones, get over it, approach to forgiveness is not the Christian way. It is not. Because, and we know this from our own lives, we know this from our own lives, it just doesn't actually work. Instead, Jesus teaches us against every instinct that we have, to directly, personally, and publicly deal with sin and conflict in our community. Now my guess is that most of us have never really done anything like what Jesus is telling us to do here. And even if you have, you probably don't do it often. You certainly don't do it every single time because wow, what Jesus is asking us to do is really hard work.

So just imagine with me for a second. You know, speaking of bad behavior on an airplane. Imagine you're sitting in your pew one Sunday. When out of the corner of your eye, you notice that someone sitting right behind you has taken off their shoes and put their stinky feet up on the back of the pew right next to your head where you're sitting. I think we can all agree, way out of bounds. Don't do it on an airplane, don't do it at church. So step one—let me get this straight—I need to go to Stinky Foot and confront him directly. Now hold on. Stinky Foot should be apologizing to me, shouldn't he? Why do I have to go to him? That's not fair, that's not fair. And you're right, that's not fair. And as much as Jesus cares about fairness, and Jesus does care about fairness, he cares more about community. Fairness is good, fairness is necessary, but fairness will never be a party. It takes community to dance. It takes community to dance. And so what we want is a community where we can dance together, party together, be together. And that sometimes requires a little bit of a sacrifice of a little bit of fairness. And so Jesus does as he often does. He assumes that the aggrieved party is wiser, stronger, and smarter, and he says, you the aggrieved, it is your job to deal with this—personally, one-on-one, you've got to deal with them. Before you complain to anybody else, you've got to deal with it. Now this is of course, with the caveat that the sin here wasn't a criminal act. This person isn't dangerous to you. It is safe—it's uncomfortable, but it's safe to do. You go and deal with them one-on-one.

And what if they don't listen? After all that, after you put yourself out there like that, what if they don't listen to you? What if they don't give you that reassuring, oh, I'm so sorry, I can't believe I did that, I didn't think of it that way, please forgive me. Well then, can you write them off? No, says Jesus, not even then. No, no, no, no, no, no. You've got to go get some friends, and then you've got to go and talk. Now can you imagine the Saturday after the Sunday of the foot incident? You're standing on Stinky Foot's front porch and ringing the bell with two or three friends, knocking on the door. Can you imagine the kind of conflict that that could cause? That could embarrass him. He could get really

angry. He might stop coming to church. He might stop paying his pledge. I bet he wouldn't answer the door at all, right? But Jesus said it's worth it, because we can't have that kind of behavior at the party, and we've got to deal with it somehow, right? And you know, if church is a dance, and if Christianity is a dance, you know, sometimes you might be a good dancer on your own, you know, but then you start dancing in community, and you realize when you're dancing out on the dance floor with a lot of other people, there's certain things that you can't do that you can do when you're alone, right? And sometimes it might take a couple other people to come over to the house and say, hey, we're going to give you a little dancing lesson. We're going to teach you a few moves. We're going to show you how it goes.

But what if he doesn't open the door? What if he doesn't listen? Well, this is where Jesus's advice just goes way over the top. This has got to be hyperbole. This is just too much. He tells us then, you've got to get the whole church involved, right? It seems like that could cause all kinds of conflict, could split the church, people could take sides. It seems like it's just too much, it's too strict, it's too mean, but I don't think that that's the way that Jesus means it to be. Because I think Christianity is like a dance party, and the best way to learn how to dance is for the whole church to turn the music up and just start showing people how to move, and showing people how not to move, and showing how we move around one another, and show one another grace, and showing that when you step on somebody's foot, you turn and you say, oh, I'm so sorry. And the best way you can teach that to somebody is by bringing them back on the dance floor as one big church and trying to show them what to do.

You know, this thing that we do, this thing called church, this community, this dance party, this is how we make Jesus Christ come alive for people. It's how we make Christianity come alive for people, and the only way we can do that is if we are 100% engaged with one another to show one another that kind of grace. You can't do that if you're secretly plotting somebody's demise. You can't do that if you're gossiping about how awful they are. You can't do that if every time they come near, you turn away and you shut your heart down. You cannot do it if you just say, well, my feelings don't matter. Nothing's really important. I'll just let these people walk all over me. Because if they're walking all over you, they're going to walk all over somebody else as well, and the dance party can't survive that. So what it takes is all of us together dancing, and it's a dance when everything is going well and everything is beautiful and everything is fun and fine, and it's a dance when somebody gets their foot stepped on, and then we all show one another how to deal with that, how to dance around it, how to make it work again, how to get back into the rhythm.

Beloved, we need one another. As Christians, as human beings, we need to be in community with one another. It is the most important part of our faith, Jesus tells us, the place where everything comes together. You can be in a relationship with God, but in some significant way, you can't be a Christian unless you're together, working together, loving together, and healing one another. So my prayer for all of us this Celebration Sunday is that we dance with one another, and we dance and we dance and we dance, and we love one another, because when we dance together and when we don't run away from

the party when our toes get stepped on, when we don't avoid conflict, when we don't allow people to come into the dance party swinging their elbows around and hitting us in the face, that is the way that we heal the world.