

The Rules of Engagement

Romans 13:8-14 and Matthew 18:15-20

September 10, 2023

- I've done it since I started.
- And I don't know if you've noticed.
- Or known why.
- I can't say if any other pastor at St. Mark has done it prior to me.
- Do you know what I'm going to say?
- More often than not, I address - and talk about you to my colleagues - as the "St. Mark family"
- Not "St. March church" - which, of course, We are.
- Any thoughts as to why?
- (wait for responses...)
- According to one definition, family is defined as "two or more people who share goals and values and have long term commitments to one another."¹
- Where two or three are gathered...
- That sounds familiar.
- The gospel text for this morning has one of the more often quoted verses: Jesus saying, "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there also."
- The verse, while not quite taken out of context when read alone, changes a bit when considered with the other verses of this morning's passage.
- Jesus is speaking to his disciples about relationships, something we know he does quite a bit.
- This time, in particular, Jesus is talking about what to do when there is a disagreement between two people.
- More specifically, Jesus addresses the question of what to do when "a brother" (i.e., "another member of the church") "sins against you".

¹ [Family Definition Wall Quotes™ Decal | WallQuotes.com](https://www.wallquotes.com)

- Jesus seems to assume that there will be conflict among his followers - it's bound to happen when people do more than remain isolated.
- When we are gathered together - more than two or three of us - there are bound to be disagreements.
- What makes us Christ followers, Jesus says, is how we go about addressing and resolving these issues.
- Of course, we are not supposed to have conflict as the world has it—through yelling, slandering, gossiping, humiliating, or even taking each other to court—but neither are we to sweep everything under the rug as if conflict does not exist, smiling on the outside while hating on the inside.
- What does Jesus say we should do?
- As one friend and pastoral colleague notes, the passage “*doesn't say “when someone in the church disappoints you, gather your friends during coffee hour to get them on your side.”*”
- Jesus *doesn't* say “when someone in the church disappoints you, stop giving until you think they've earned it back.”
- Jesus *doesn't* say “when someone in the church disappoints you, leave in huff so people know you're mad but don't ever say why.”
- What Jesus *does* say is, “when you're in community, I am there, and it is holy ground, and sometimes people are going to people, and there will be hurt and disappointment and how you respond matters.”²
- It's true that, at times, we may think, "It really doesn't matter how I relate to the person sitting next to me in the church pew or the one sitting at the desk next to mine at work."
- All that matters, we may think, is that we do the job well, get home, feed the kids supper, help with homework, and then go to bed to start the day all over again tomorrow. Check the boxes.
- Low on the list of priorities, when life gets busy, is the bitter relationship that seems to never get mended at the office.

² the Natalia Terfa translation

- Who has time to ponder the harsh words that were said between you and a fellow church member that resulted in a cold, awkward silence between you both?
- We have too much to do to stop and consider relationships—or do we?
- If we use this passage as guidance, as the rules of how we interact and engage with one another, it **is** critical that we keep relationships as a high priority on our everyday list of things to do because Jesus calls us to do so.
- We are called to find value in each person that is in our lives, not thinking we are “better” or “lesser” than another.
- Each member is of great value, and no member may be considered superior to any others.
- So if we take Jesus’s teachings this morning and bring them back to present-day, thinking about THIS church, THIS family, then we need to keep in mind that we are not a voluntary association of like-minded individuals that determines its life by the majority.
- This passage has the step-by-step of what to do when there is a problem.
- First, go to the person.
- If that doesn’t work, go to step two: bring one or two people with you and try again.
- But if THAT doesn’t work, THEN what?
- Tell the church.
- But in the non-gossipy way.
- You go to the body, the family, the church.
- In that sense.
- For constructive feedback, attempting to find a way to make things better.
- Because it’s not about you and that person...
- Well, it is.
- But it’s not.
- Because it is about how the two of you engage one another for the sake of the whole.

- Each step outlined by Jesus in the passage this morning is to be undertaken in the hope of healing and restoration.
- In our modern-day community, it seems the pattern of culture and society is to gather people onto your side and create divisions and coalitions around you.
- In church life, more specifically, these hurts are commonly dealt with by one or more people leaving the church in anger, joining another church down the street, or dropping out altogether.
- Author and Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber, tells a story that when she used to lead new member classes at her first church, she made sure to remind people of her humanity. “I will disappoint you,” she said. “We will disappoint you.”
- But life is full of disappointments, don’t you think?
- I once heard someone say the worst thing a mom could say to their child wasn’t “I’m angry” but, instead, “I’m disappointed.”
- Ugh.
- Right?
- Don’t think I haven’t thought about that now, as a mother myself.
- It leaves a lasting mark.
- Continuing her story, Bolz-Weber says that if people leave the church due to hurt and disappointment, then they won’t get to see how the grace of God can come in and fill the holes left by our community’s failure, and that’s just too beautiful and too real to miss.
- By sticking around, by doing all possible to make amends, we first honor the other person by speaking the truth in love, pouring our whole selves into the process for the sake of our relationship and the community as a whole.
- Because the relationship between two people, when multiplied amongst a congregation, makes a difference to the whole body.
- And this is the important point that Paul makes in his letter to the Romans this morning as well.
- Paul speaks of the ultimate – and most important kind of love – *agape* love.

- *Agape* love is the selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love, the highest of the four types of love in the Bible.
- Agape love can serve as an identity marker or descriptor of the Christian community.
- As an identity marker, love defines the attitude, behavior, and norm by which the Christian community takes account of its life.
- This love, as the Christian mystics put it, has two feet: love of God and love of neighbor.
- It is not that one must love God first in order to love the neighbor, but that the love of God is simultaneously inseparable from the love of neighbor, because God has become the neighbor.
- In today's polarizing climate, it is critical that we keep this in mind when we realize that everyone is our neighbor. (Remember the last 4 weeks with Mr. Rogers?)
- And that everyone should be loved, just as God first loved us.
- Paul, however, makes clear that love has very little to do with emotion.
- The examples of love to which he refers have to do with behavior rather than feelings.
- Our neighbors will know that we love them by how we treat them, not by greeting card clichés.
- Paul lays it out plainly: therefore, there is to be no mystery about how we act in God's name.
- Christians are not called to be subtle and secret, but to live so that everyone can see clearly who they are.
- (pause)
- To bring it back to the beginning and why I call us the "Fellowship Family":
- Families are supportive.
- Families do what they can to lift one another up.
- At times, family can "look" ugly and messy.
- Of course, there is always the exception, but in our case, it's true..
- I tend to think it's that way because your family is the "safe" space where your true self can come out.

- So, at times, it will be messy.
- But families stick together.
- Families help one another out.
- But I should mention that there is one other element to the definition of family that I read earlier.
- The definition of family, in its whole, is: two or more people who share goals and values and have long term commitments to one another that share a common ancestor.
- Think about it for a minute...
- In a family of faith, who might that ancestor be?
- Yup.
- It's as clear as the nose on my face.
- The Sunday school answer:
- Jesus.
- Therefore... we ARE all family.
- So I think we need to bring it all in... kick it off right...
- Amen.