

# A message to the church family

*delivered by the Rev. Lawrence Wood, 22 June 2008*

As I mentioned earlier, I won't be preaching in the usual fashion today. A different sort of message seems in order – or so I've gathered from the many people asking about recent happenings, wild rumors, what's being done, and what we've learned.

Believe me, I would rather talk about something easier, like whether Jesus walked on water, but it seems important for us to address what's going on, and to do so in the context of faith.

As it happens, this message grows out of a very religious idea. The roots of it are in today's readings from Matthew about reconciliation and forgiveness. In the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter, Jesus talks about the time when his followers will be gathered into churches. As we know from the letters of Paul, those early churches had plenty of trouble; members pulled every which way.

So here is Jesus, counseling them how to work through those difficulties. This chapter really offers extraordinary advice.

First of all, Jesus notes, "Occasions for stumbling are bound come." That's a simple fact about life in church. Things happen. He doesn't mince words about how bad it is to cause others to stumble. But he also refuses to exclude anyone from reconciliation and forgiveness.

Look at these verses:

"If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost."  
*Matthew 18:12-14*

According to Jesus, you don't grouse that the sheep has brought trouble on itself, you don't just let it go. No, everyone if possible must be kept in the fold.

And look at what comes next. In the very next verses, Jesus gets to the heart of the matter:

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if that one refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector."  
*Matthew 18:15-17*

And we all know how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors, don't we? He loved them, too! He didn't exclude anybody!

This whole chapter, about dealing with issues in the church, counsels reconciliation and forgiveness:

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” *Matthew 18:21-22*

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Now, with a deep breath, I’d like to talk about recent events. There have been a lot of rumors, and unfortunately I can’t begin to clear all of them up. All I aim to do here is talk about Jesus’ suggestion for resolving issues. And there won’t be any finger-pointing in this account except at myself.

Back in October, shortly after arriving, I met with the staff and shared some expectations. Above all else, I hoped that we would work together as a team. It would be essential, I said, for us to support one another; to bring our problems or needs to one another before bringing them to anyone else; and to keep open minds.

At another staff meeting in November, I proposed that we develop a policy for resolving any conflicts that might arise. No issue led to this discussion – just my sense that the church was in a time of change, and that it would be wise for us to have a procedure in place. Over the next few weeks, we circulated a draft; the staff improved it; and at our regular Wednesday meeting we all finally adopted it.

It’s pretty simple. If one of us has an issue with another, our first step is to sleep on it – to pray on it – and to see if the matter resolves on its own.

If it persists in our minds, the next step is to search ourselves and ask, *What have I done to contribute to this problem? Is there anything I can do to resolve it? What do I want to happen? What if that doesn’t happen?*

That may be enough to resolve an issue. But if it persists, the third step is to go directly to the person with whom one has a problem, to explain the problem, and to try to work it out in a constructive way.

If the matter is still unresolved, then the fourth and final step is to bring the matter to the Senior Minister (or, if the problem is with me, to the Moderator), who will then bring it to the Pastor-Parish Committee or the Personnel Committee, depending on the nature of the case. The committee may ask for a written report on the steps taken so far. Prayerfully but promptly, the committee will respond; and with that response, whether or not everyone is satisfied, the matter will be resolved.

So our staff agreed to this procedure. We shared it with our moderator, Kiki Karpen, and at the start of this year, the Church Council adopted it as well.

Through the winter and spring, our staff had occasions to put this procedure to use. Unfortunately, we did not always do so. I say “we” because a head of staff needs to take responsibility for staff.

As almost all of you know, Wendy Mulligan came to my office days before a congregational vote and tendered her resignation. The Personnel Committee had been afraid that might happen, and had hoped there might be another outcome; in any event, we all wanted Wendy to continue through the end of the program year. If possible, we

hoped that she would agree to de-couple her decision from the vote. We thought that would reflect better on everyone and would let the congregation thank her in grand style.

Wendy indicated that she needed some time to think about this request. I readily acknowledged that she and Bill should do that together. We agreed to talk again, after the church vote, about timing and an announcement. Kiki and I both promised her our complete confidentiality until she and Bill had decided what was best for their family.

As it turned out, this attempt at confidentiality proved naïve and costly. I should have known that the news would get out sooner. I should have told the search committee rather than try to honor that confidentiality. In trying to follow the Personnel Committee's wishes and arrange a more graceful conclusion, I managed to make things worse – and for that I take full responsibility.

In the immediate aftermath, many of us reached out to people that we knew were hurting or confused. On the Monday night after the church vote, I met with youth and parents about the mission trip, and together we talked about where to go from here. I've sat down with a number of folks to hear their concerns. The Deacons and Church Council are working hard to make sure everyone in the church family feels heard.

In looking back over this painful sequence, I am all the more convinced that we need to use our process for resolving conflict. Small difficulties became larger because we – we, as a staff and a church – did not take those simple steps.

From here on out, I hope we will build supportive relationships and bring our issues to the person concerned before taking them to anyone else.

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So, did Jesus walk on water? Well, if he did, I'd like to know how.

When it comes to being a good church, we know what to do. We've been given clear guidance, and we can own it. It will keep our heads above water. And the steps, however we may doubt them, will be just as miraculous.