

Unforgiven: Matthew 18:15-20; Romans 13:8-14

Jesus knew forgiveness would always need special emphasis.

by [William L. Hawkins](#) in the [August 14, 2002](#) issue

"I don't smoke them," he said. "I eat them." I knew what he meant. Neither one of us smoked cigarettes until we were a few months into our first pastorates—tiny, rural churches staffed by us city boys straight out of seminary. When Reinhold Niebuhr wrote glowingly in his diary about small churches in rural communities he admitted that some are "small and mean." He had in mind the church I was serving. Although it has been nearly 20 years, my memories are as vivid as if it were yesterday. For three years I went to bed every night with knots in my stomach.

Two hundred yards down the road from the church was the manse, and beyond it, soybean fields stretching as far as one could see. To the left were three homes occupied by three couples, all in their late '50s and early '60s. Four of the six were elders and all of them had been ordained in the church to which I was called. But only one couple still belonged. Four years earlier the other two households had left, angry with each other and the church over a vote at a session meeting. They had joined other Presbyterian churches in the county, and had not spoken to each other for four years.

The couple that stayed had tried to talk to the others, but the meeting only brought more resentment. The interim minister addressed the matter head-on by preaching from Matthew 18:15-20. In light of scripture and the circumstances, he said, the congregation needed to stop in the middle of the service and process together to the homes of the other two families. So they did. But nothing came of it. Both families were appreciative and courteous, but their decisions were final; they were not coming back.

By the time of my arrival, membership had dropped from 115 to 70. The disappointment over the congregation's failed attempt at reconciliation had damaged its spirit in ways no one wanted to admit. Everyone, including this wet-

behind-the-ears pastor, walked around on egg shells.

“See how these Christians love one another,” was the pagan observation of the new quality of life among the members of this new sect, alive and growing in second-century Rome. Without exaggerating the piety of that primitive church, I wondered how my new congregation had come to its sorry pass. What quality of life could my congregation offer that would attract outsiders?

And what about other congregations? What difference does it make when people leave a congregation over some tiff, join another congregation, and allow us all to avoid the difficult and arguably primary Christian work of forgiveness and reconciliation? Does anybody really believe that this scandalous behavior within churches is lost on society in general?

In Paul’s summary of the second table of the law, those commandments having to do with our horizontal obligations, he emphasizes that “love” fulfills the law. As he summarizes Leviticus 19, he reminds us of the final word: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This is not sentimental, hormonal and romantic “love.” This love is an act of the will. As N. T. Wright says, this “love will grit its teeth and act as if the emotions were in place, trusting they will follow in good time.” This love, modeled as it is on the action of God in Christ, is willing to suffer patiently in the unrelenting effort to achieve forgiveness and reconciliation. Christians believe that cruciform love is both intrinsic to Christian community and to the paradoxical power that overcomes the world. So why is it so rarely practiced in the life of the church?

Fred Craddock once said that throughout history Christianity had civilized millions, moralized thousands and converted a few. Is that what our congregations need most: conversion? My former teacher, Robert Johnson, once carried on a lengthy correspondence with Paul Tillich. For years the two men debated the role of preaching in the faith formation of the congregation. Finally, Tillich observed that underneath their differences lay the simple fact that Johnson didn’t believe the congregation was Christian while he, Tillich, did. Johnson concurred that his teacher had called it right—Johnson didn’t believe church members were very Christian about their faith. For if they really knew what it meant to be a follower of Christ, said Johnson, quoting Karl Barth, “the number of those calling themselves Christian would melt like snow before the sun.”

As that sun continues to set on mainstream Protestantism in the West, there is no want of reasons to account for its galloping demise. For Robert Wuthnow, Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, it is “declining birth rates”; for Tony Campolo, “affluenza”; for Martin Marty, “weekend trips”; for John Buchanan, lack of “mission” (defined as outreach ministries); and for Will Willimon, it’s because “Rotary meets at a more convenient time.”

It is, I believe, the lack of forgiveness if not faithlessness itself that belongs at the top of the list. More than anything else, the unwillingness to perform the difficult task of forgiveness and reconciliation in the love and spirit of Christ is what robs the church of that quality of life that first attracted outsiders. It was that quality of the church’s life that set it uniquely apart from all other attempts at creating community. By the grace of God, it still can.

The only petition of the Lord’s Prayer with a condition placed at the conclusion is the one about forgiveness. One cannot help believing that Jesus knew forgiveness would always need special emphasis. The need for that emphasis will remain till the kingdom comes.