

When seminary professor Steve Harper was earning his doctorate
 He traveled to London to study John Wesley's original journals
 In that Methodist center, they had daily Morning Prayer
 When Steve entered the sanctuary, he realized he was the only one there
 The center's director entered from the sacristy and began the service
 Afterwards, Steve asked him if it was always this packed...
 And he answered him...

***When two or three are gathered in my name,
 I am there among them.***

I think it's a bit sad that this powerful quote is primarily used
 As an excuse for poorly attended worship services

But there it is.

I think there's another reason why this sentence is used so frequently
 I think it's because the part that precedes it is hard to hear

***If someone sins against you, go tell them.
 And if they ignore you, go back at them, but bring reinforcements
 And if they still ignore you, announce it to everybody
 And if they ignore everybody, then shun them.***

Wait a minute. What about forgiveness?
 And who are we to judge? I thought that was God's role.
No wonder that so many people skip right to the end.

Comus, Duke of Florence liked to point out limitations of religion

***You shall read that we are commanded to forgive our enemies,
 But you never read that we are commanded to forgive our friends.***

We've all heard it, *Forgive your enemies*.

But gloss over grudges...

Especially between people in the same pew!

Maybe we'd like it better if the passage read

Whenever two or three are gathered in my name

There will be two or three valid opinions on how things should be done.

Even in the best groups, there will be conflict

And Jesus *knew* there would be

And so, he gave this directive

If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him...

work it out between the two of you.

If he listens, you've made a friend.

If he won't listen, take one or two others along

so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest...

and try again.

If he still won't listen... tell the church.

If he won't listen to the church... you'll have to start over from scratch.

Confront him with the need for repentance...

and offer again... God's forgiving love.

Jesus was OK with this... and here's why...

He loved his people so much

He wanted nothing but the best for them.

He wanted everybody to get to heaven

Spend eternity in God's presence... Not separated and alone.

Remember when you were a kid
 And you did something wrong
 And you were sent to your room
 And you could hear the sounds of the other kids
 Laughing and having fun
 And you were not part of it
 You were alone in the silence?
 Imagine that on a universal scale
 With all the company of heaven
 Rejoicing as only angels and archangels can
 And you miss all of it

You see, that is what sin does
 Sin separates us from God

In today's Old Testament reading
 God warned the people through the prophet Ezekiel
The wicked ones will surely die,
And if you do not warn them
Then their blood is on your hands!

We are not supposed to sin... We *got* that... BUT
 We're also supposed to help keep others from sinning as well

Now it easy to see how some self-righteous jerk
 could latch onto this passage and use it like a club
 to beat people into submission...

This is NOT was Jesus said
 Jesus said... *Love* each other... *Help* each other...
Encourage each other

Jesus asked us to judge people... In fact... he said quite the opposite...
Let he who is without sin cast the first stone!

He told us how to approach someone who sins...

Take them aside... *In private*

And to tell them how their behavior is hurting others... an themselves...

Hopefully..... They hear us... and change their ways

Because when they do,

There is *great* rejoicing in heaven

In Psalm 119 we read

Teach me O Lord the way of your statutes,

and I shall keep it to the end.

Give me an understanding, and I shall keep your law;

I shall keep it with all my heart.

Paul said it in the reading from Romans

Love one another

For one who loves another has fulfilled the law

The commandments

You shall not commit adultery,

You shall not murder

You shall not steal

You shall not covet

Are summed up this way...

Love your neighbor as yourself

You can't go wrong when you love others.

When you add up everything in scripture... the sum total is *love*.

Now what if it's *us* that get pulled aside?

What if *we're* the sinful ones?

Do we cross our arms, refuse to listen, and keep doing the same things?

Or can we see these moments as loving caring gestures
offered by people who truly love us and want the very best for us

Norman Vincent Peal said

*The trouble with most of us
is that we would rather be ruined by praise
than saved by criticism*

Two brothers... lived on adjoining farms... became enemies.

It was their first serious rift in 40 years of working together.

It began with a small misunderstanding...

grew into a major difference...

then exploded into a bitter exchange of vicious words

and finally... weeks of silence.

One morning... a knocking on John's door.

A man with a carpenter's toolbox.

I'm looking for a few days' work...

do you would have a small jobs I could help with?

Yes. I do have a job.

See across the creek? that farm? That's my younger brother's...

Last week, there was a meadow between us,

but he took his bulldozer and dug a small river between us.

I'm going to do him one better.

See that pile of old lumber?

I want you to build an 8-foot-high fence between us.

so I won't see his *place or* his *face* again.

Show me the nails and the tools... and I'll get started!

The older brother had meetings in town, so he left for the day.
When he returned ... his eyes bugged out... his jaw dropped.
There was no fence!
The carpenter built a bridge!
from one side of the river to the other... complete with handrails.

His younger brother, walked toward his enemy...
hand outstretched...

You're pretty amazing... especially after everything I said and did.

The two brothers met in the middle, and held each other...

They turned to see the carpenter leaving.

Wait! Stay! We have more for you to do...

I'd love to... but I have more bridges to build.

It's time...

Time for all of us to stop creating separations.

Time to start building bridges.

Time for a fresh starts... New beginnings...

Time to get serious... about LOVE!

***When two or three are gathered in my name,
I am there among them.***