

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“Foundations: We Wrestle”

Exodus 16:1-8; 1 Corinthians 5:9-13

March 2, 2014

He had her cornered. She had heard rumors about him but she did not believe them. He had seemed so nice. But now, in a Sunday school classroom at her Presbyterian Church, this man had her backed into a corner of the room. His words were inappropriate and she told him so. He did not stop. His hands began to move where they should not. She pushed them away. She told him to move away, yet he continued his advance. Finally she used both hands, and with one mighty push, knocked him out of her way and she fled in tears. How could this have happened she wondered? Maybe she had done something. She wrestled with what to do. Should she tell someone? Should she keep quiet? He was an elder in the church; a long time respected member. It would be her word against his. And besides, wasn't she supposed to forgive and forget? What was she going to do?

One of the fascinating things about the church is that we exist behind a conspiracy of niceness. What I mean by that is that because we are Christians we are willing to put up with abusive behavior by others that would not be tolerated in virtually any other situation. We do so because we have been taught to believe that loving means not speaking up when something is wrong. We do not want to appear to be judgmental. We do not want to appear to be unloving. We do not want to appear to be someone who disrupts the harmony of the church. We do not want to be the one to point out someone else's faults. Church is to about harmony, love and grace. We are to be forgiving. For many of us this means that we are to forgive people even before they ask and even if they never ask. Forgiveness means passing over the inappropriate deeds of others. Finally we do all of this because we believe it is what scripture calls us to do; love, forgive and be nice.

The Apostle Paul would be the first to say that this way of being the church misses the point of being the church. In the section of Paul's letter to the church at Corinth which we read this morning Paul is addressing the actions of those who are being inappropriate in the church in ways, which if left unchecked, would destroy the church. I realize that this passage has been used again and again to focus on one thing, sexually inappropriate behavior. And more often than not, on what the church has considered to be society's inappropriate sexual behavior. What we need to notice then are two things. First Paul makes it clear that he has no right to judge those outside of the church...yeah who would have thought. Second, Paul focuses on a series of behaviors, not just on sexual misconduct. I believe that he focuses on them because the Corinthians were involved in all of them, and these behaviors were, as I said a moment ago, ripping at the very fabric of the church.

At this point it would be very easy for us to look at the list of bad behaviors that Paul lists and assume, as many people do, that these are merely a generic list of bad behaviors. But they are not. As I said a moment ago, they are in fact a list of practices in which the Corinthians are

engaging. If we had more time this morning I could take you through the letter and point them all out, because Paul addresses each one. What is more important however is that we understand Paul's concern for the church; that it is a temple of God in Jesus Christ, and as a temple it is a place and community centered on love, not on destructive behaviors. In the 13th chapter of this letter Paul writes of love as an attitude of community. Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful. Most of us have heard these words before. For Paul then, the kind of destructive behaviors shown by many of the Corinthians need to stop. And if the people will not stop then they need to be removed from the community, like leaven is removed from a Jewish household before Passover.

Many of us might think that this kind of a response is a bit less than Christian. Yet it is not. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus lays out a similar process for dealing with destructive behavior. Both Jesus and Paul understand that the community of believers is to be a place of safety and not fear; of love that builds up, rather than tears down. Only in this way can the church become a place where people are continually nurtured and encouraged to be the people God wants them to be.

So what did the woman do? She wrestled with the incident, and when a new pastor arrived, shared her story. It turned out that she was not alone. This man had been cornering women for years while his behavior was ignored. When the pastor confronted the man he denied that he his actions were wrong. Ultimately the session, with pastoral encouragement, brought him up on church disciplinary charges. Instead of having to answer the charges he resigned his membership, believing that this would give him permission to continue with his behavior. The church finally took out a civil injunction against him barring him from the church. Unchristian? No, the church held him accountable, and protected the vulnerable. This is what we are to be about.

So we in the church wrestle. We wrestle with what it means to be a Christian community. We wrestle with being loving while also protecting the vulnerable. But we wrestle because we believe the church is to be a place of safety and grace. The challenge then is to ask, "How are my words and actions making First Church a place of safety and love for all?"