

September 6, 2026
Couraging
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I had been at my first church for a year when the leadership and senior pastor came to the decision to fire the music director who had been there for 20 years. And it was a BIG deal. Of course, there were faults on all sides – conflicts swept under rugs, people speaking in whispers and through gossip, passive aggressive behavior – all of this unhealthy behavior had been going on for a long time but it really peaked when this happened. And, I remember the Senior Pastor telling me that he had known it would be better if the music director was fired the first year he was at the church, but he hadn't wanted to upset people when he was so new. And so when it happened, many years later, it was much, much worse than it might have been. People said awful things to each other, some left the church, there were anonymous letters passed around, people were hurt and angry. But, also, things finally came out in the open and it forced a lot of honest conversations, and in the following year or two, the health of the church improved quite a lot. I'll never forget the conversation I had with the senior pastor sometime later when he said he wished he had just had the courage to deal with that conflict sooner and more directly. How he thought, if he had just had the courage earlier, a great deal of pain and hurt would have been avoided.

I've been thinking about courage this week. Most often, our culture links courage with physical bravery; of standing strong in the face of danger or fear. At least, courage in physical bravery is also often what gets attention. We see stories of physical bravery on the news all the time – soldiers sacrificing their lives for our country, firefighters running into burning buildings, doctors and nurses putting themselves at risk to treat others, parents who perform feats of physical strength to save their child.

And there are certainly many examples in our faith of those who had the courage to be physically brave. David, when he fights Goliath; Paul, when he risks death and persecution to spread the gospel, and most of all, Jesus when he went to the cross. These, and other acts of bravery, from the martyrs and faithful through the years, inspire others to face physical danger, and even death, with the courage that this life is not the end and the belief that some things are worth dying for. These are inspiring stories.

But courage can be so much more than physical bravery. Courage can be facing a conflict that you know will be difficult and messy. It can be the willingness to be vulnerable or the ability to admit fault. Courage can be the openness to change one's

mind or to show compassion to someone different from you. Courage can be finding a way to forgive someone who has hurt you or to share with someone your deepest fears. Courage can be a willingness to try and fail and then try again. It can be choosing to remain hopeful, when it seems all hope is lost. Some days courage can simply be getting out of bed and facing the day. Courage can mean speaking the truth in love to someone even when you know they don't want to hear it. Most of what courage asks of us, day to day, has nothing to do with physical danger and everything to do with the condition of our hearts, our spirit.

Because while our faith may require physical bravery from us at some points, there is no doubt that courage of the spirit is absolutely necessary, often on a daily basis, especially when we are trying to live in the way of Jesus.

But courage isn't something we are just born with and it doesn't always, or often, come easily. Mary Daly said, "Courage is...a habit, a virtue: You get it by courageous acts. It's like you learn to swim by swimming. You learn courage by couraging." [1] Courage, in other words, is a spiritual discipline, something practiced, not possessed.

I think this has all come to mind for me this week because of the scripture we read today. Honestly, most preachers skip this little part of Matthew because it is a hard little list of instructions. And the people who have preached it have often used it with a bad interpretation to justify excluding or kicking people out of community. The teaching sits between two parables – one about leaving the ninety nine to find the one lost sheep. And one about forgiving not seven times but seventy seven times. Jesus places his instructions about conflict right between a story about relentless inclusion and a story about relentless forgiveness. That is not an accident, and I think it tells us how to read what comes between.

There is a famous line in today's passage I suspect you may have heard before: "wherever two or three of you are gathered in my name, I am there." This passage often gets used when Christians gather together for worship or when a few people get together to pray or study. And that's fine. But when we read the whole passage this line is from, we see that Jesus wasn't talking about bible study or potlucks. He was actually giving a really important lesson about conflict in community. These are the guidelines about what we should do when we are angry or upset with one another; when something has gone wrong in the community.

First it is worth noticing that Jesus doesn't say "if" someone hurts you. He assumes that it will happen. These are guidelines for when someone hurts you. Author John Fairless writes, "We have too often built pictures of the church in which harm is not supposed to

happen. Christians are supposed to love each other. So we act surprised, or we hide the hurt, or we make the person who was hurt feel like the problem, because their pain is inconvenient to the fantasy that we are the kind of place where this does not happen.

Jesus is not that naive. Jesus knows that people who follow him will still be people. He knows that sinners drawn together into community will continue to sin. He knows that the church is not exempt from the same failures of love that every other human community suffers. And he does not act surprised. He gives us a process. Because he knows we are going to need one.

That is, itself, a mercy. The Jesus who wrote this passage is not a Jesus who is disappointed in his church for having conflicts. He is a Jesus who has anticipated our real lives and given us practical instructions.”

And they are very practical instructions. He tells us:

Go to the person. Alone. Not to a friend first, not to social media, not to a whispered conversation after the service — to the person, directly, privately. If that doesn't resolve it, bring one or two others — not to build a case against the person, not to gang up, but as witnesses who can help both of you see clearly. If that still doesn't work, bring it to the whole community. And if even that fails, Jesus says, treat the person as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.

That last line sounds harsh until you remember who Jesus actually was in the habit of eating dinner with. Gentiles and tax collectors weren't people Jesus wrote off — they were exactly the people he sought out, table after table, meal after meal. So even Jesus' "last resort" isn't exile. It's just an honest acknowledgment that the relationship has changed, paired with the assumption — built into everything else we know about Jesus — that you keep pursuing them anyway. The door doesn't close. It just requires a different kind of persistence.

But this is not our natural instinct. When conflict comes up many, if not most of us, instead experience the temptation to respond very differently than Jesus' advice. Instead, we are more likely to be tempted to avoid conflict altogether. Or we're tempted to gossip: to tell other people about the person or behavior that's offended us, rather than to address our concerns directly to the person or people involved. Sometimes we're tempted to gang up on each other, to recruit like-minded people to our side and create echo chambers of grievance. We definitely prefer to air our grievance only in such echo-chambers, or in front of overwhelmingly friendly audiences where accountability is minimal. And all too often we're tempted to regard our opponents as if they are unwelcome or better off elsewhere, outside our community entirely.”

Does that sound familiar?

Every one of those temptations leads to the same two places: a community that grows more divided and estranged, or people quietly leaving to go something else. Which is exactly why Jesus tucks this teaching between a story about not losing anyone and a story about forgiving without limit. He knows where these temptations lead. He's telling us how not to go there.

None of what Jesus asks here is easy. Going directly to someone instead of gossiping about them takes courage — the courage to risk an uncomfortable conversation instead of the false comfort of a sympathetic audience. Bringing in a witness who might not simply take your side takes courage. Staying at the table with someone even after a hard conversation, refusing to write them off, takes courage. Owning your part of what went wrong, listening without getting defensive, communicating what you actually feel instead of what's easier to say — these are all, as one might put it, advanced-level grown-up stuff.

C.S. Lewis said, "Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point." Every one of Jesus' instructions here is a testing point. And we learn courage by couraging — by practicing it, again and again, in a community that's practicing alongside us.

That's the other thing Jesus doesn't do here: he doesn't hand out this teaching and walk away. "Where two or three are gathered, I am there" isn't a throwaway line about worship attendance — it's a promise attached directly to the hard work that comes before it. When we come together to address our differences, to resolve disputes, to repair what's broken between us, Jesus says he is present in it. Supporting it. Blessing it. We're not asked to find this courage alone. We build it together, and then we carry it out into the rest of our lives.

I think about that conversation with the senior pastor often — his honesty, years later, about what he wished he'd done differently. Not because he lacked care for his church. He cared enormously, which is part of why he waited. But waiting didn't spare anyone the pain. It just delayed it and let it grow. I think about it every time I'm tempted to pretend a conflict isn't there or to sweep something under the rug or to go to someone else to complain or gossip or be affirmed that I'm in the right. I think about it and try to have the courage to do what Jesus says instead.

So for your consideration this week I invite you to consider: Is there a conversation or a conflict you've been avoiding — one you know, somewhere underneath the avoidance, needs to happen? Not a hundred abstract opportunities for courage, just that one. Jesus doesn't promise that conversation will be easy. But he does promise he'll be there in the middle of it. May we have the courage to have it anyway.

[1] <https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-quotes-on-courage/>