

*Sermon: Mending Broken Bridges (Revised)*  
*Text: Matthew 18:15-20*  
*Date: September 08, 2008*  
*Place: Jesup First UMC*

*Sermon: Mending Broken Bridges*  
*Text: Matthew 18:15-20*  
*Date: September 08, 2002*  
*Place: Wrightsville First UMC*

It was the first day of school and Tommy Dunn was a mess. He had his own agenda the minute he stepped through the door. He wanted to play when he should have been learning; he wanted to talk when he should have been listening. He even talked back to the teacher a few times. So, she sent Tommy to the principal's office and after a heart to heart talk, Tommy promised to do better.

So, the next day, the principal wanted to see how things were going, so he reached over and turned on the PA system and sure enough, Tommy was up to his old tricks. He was talking and walking all around the room. So the principal picked up the mic and said: "*Tommy Wheeler, sit down and be quiet young man.*" And Tommy stopped and looked up to the ceiling, and without any hesitation, he fell on his knees, folded his hands, bowed his head and said: "*Yes sir, God, I will.*"

I guess they say: "*When the cat's away the mice will play.*" There is something about us that acts one way when we know we're being watched and another way when we're not. And sometimes, even church folks act out in church when we think God isn't watching!

Now, there are two great truths about the church that we need to keep in mind: **first**, where two or more are gathered in His name, Jesus is always there. And **second**, where two or more are gathered, there will always be conflict. Jesus knew there would be conflict in the church and so, He gave the disciples a few guidelines for dealing with conflict. He said: "***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 the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a person be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

This morning, I want us to walk through these guidelines step by step, so that we can rediscover how to handle conflict within the family of God.

#### **1. CONFRONT THOSE WHO OFFEND YOU PRIVATELY.**

Jesus said: *“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.”* If someone hurts you and it’s serious enough to sit and brood over, serious enough that you find yourself wanting to mention it to others, serious enough that you are facing the temptation to gossip about the person, then you need to go to that person and try to work it out.

Now, listen, this isn’t easy. Nobody likes confrontation. Well, most of us don’t anyway! But letting things slide and sitting around brooding about them in private doesn’t solve anything. So, Jesus said confront the person in private.

Now, this is strange, because we expect those who offend us to come to us, but Jesus said we should go to them. Why? Well, sometimes the person doesn’t even realize anything has happened.

See, you could be sitting around fuming over something that the other person doesn't even know about. Or maybe the person has an explanation for what has happened and is hoping that everything will work itself out.

You see, when there's conflict, there is more at stake than just your peace of mind. Conflict in the church can cause disunity and disharmony. Conflict can cause people to stumble in their Christian walk and sometimes, even leave the church. So, it must be confronted. And it must be confronted privately. Now, as a person who occasionally offends people, I can tell you: nothing is worse than hearing through the grapevine that somebody is mad about something I've said, something I've done, or something I haven't done.

If there's a problem, it needs to be talked about in private, not in a UMW Circle or a Sunday School class or through the information hotline. Jesus said: *"If any 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 what happens if the person who has offended you refuses to listen? What if he refuses to understand where you're coming from? Or what if he remains adamant that he is right and you are wrong? Then, Jesus gives us another principle.

## **2. CONFRONT THOSE WHO OFFEND YOU WITH WITNESSES.**

Jesus said: *"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.”

After you’ve talked privately, if you still can’t find peace about the situation, then take someone with you as a mediator. Maybe a mediator can bring some objectivity to the situation. Maybe that person can help both of you see the error of your ways. But what happens if the person still won’t listen? What if, after being told that they aren’t completely right, they are still adamant that they are right and you are wrong? Then, Jesus gives us another principle.

### **3. CONFRONT THOSE WHO OFFEND YOU WITHIN THE CHURCH.**

Jesus said: “If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.” There’s something about the collective wisdom of the church that can bring peace to a confusing situation. Even as imperfect as we are, Jesus places a great responsibility on the shoulders of the church. He said: “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

The decisions the church makes are not made in a vacuum; they’re made under the leading of the Holy Spirit in the very presence of God. Jesus said: “Where two or more are gathered together in my name, there I will be in the midst.” In other words, we’re in the same situation Tommy was on his first day of school. The Lord is with us. He’s watching and listening! How we handle conflict and how we respond to those who offend us matters to God.

Jesus cares deeply about the unity of the church. John tells us that one of the primary things on Jesus’

mind the night before His death was the unity of the church. In John 17, He prayed: “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, even as we are one.” Jesus prayed for our unity and He died for our unity. And I believe with all my heart, it is something we should strive for and work toward, because the same Lord, who died to reconcile us to God, died to reconcile us to one another.

So, brothers and sisters, on this Communion Sunday, as we come before the Lord’ Table, let us examine our lives and “Let us strive to maintain unity in the bond of love.”

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.