

"In the Groove of Grace." Ex. 12:1-14; Ps. 149; Matt. 18:15-20
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
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One of the good things about this time of year is that we are nearing the end of the season of road construction. Many other things are just starting up like our school activities, more regular meeting schedules, and our church activities. Most of this is good news, I think, and, yes, I'm also grateful for the work and the effort that goes into improving our roads. But, I am ready for the orange barrels to go away and the lane restrictions and the traffic back ups and the detours to end.

One of the road improvements that is becoming more and more common is the addition of a grooved strip just outside of the white line between the road and the shoulder. There's no more "grace period" to a wandering car. Nowadays you have only to stray a few inches beyond the white line and you are greeted with the annoying and spine-jarring vibration and sound that the rumble strip generates. It is a wake-up call of the first order and sends us quickly back to the relative quiet of the main road.

Going back many years you may recall stories of the Conestoga Wagons heading west over paths made famous by the pioneers, roads like the Oregon Trail. Even today you can still see the remains of these well-worn paths. You will see the grooves made by the wagon wheels. The "two-track" heads off into the distance and with a little imagination one can even make out the team of horses or oxen pulling the wagon with all the family's possessions as they headed off to seek a new start in life.

Going back fewer years, but still far enough to lose some of our

younger ones, there are the records many of us grew up listening to. They are now called "vinyls", but we knew them as "LP's" or "45's", or "78's".

There is still a special place in my mind's ear for that scratchy sound that we heard after the needle dropped and before the music started. If we played the same record long enough it might get a little touchy and not want to play as easily. Of course a scratch in the surface would often send the music around and around on a very short loop until someone moved the needle or hit the side of the record player to bump it into a different groove.

Today is "Back in the Groove" Sunday, the day when we gear up for the start of Church School classes, weekly programs and music groups and the more regular parts of our program year. Next Sunday we return to our 8:30 and 10:45 worship services with Christian Education for everyone at 9:30.

Getting back in the groove is a good thing. The Conestoga Wagon that ventured off the path often had a much more difficult time than those who trusted that the well-worn path was well-worn for a reason. And those highway rumble strips are the essence of what happens when we go against the groove. When the old vinyl wasn't in the groove, we knew it immediately and took steps to fix it.

But of course there are alternate views. One of the most famous is voiced by Robert Frost in his poem The Road Not Taken: "Two roads diverged in a wood and I - I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." The image of the solitary traveler, the rugged individual, is an American Icon that sometimes pushes against the call to live in community and with mutual accountability.

That's what the church of Jesus Christ is called to do: To live in community as his body in the world and to be an example of the new life that is possible in him.

Today's text from Matthew's Gospel reminds us that being in relationships with one another and sticking together is hard work. Believe it or not, even Jesus' disciples can be a real pain sometimes.

And the fact that Jesus uttered these words means that right from the start or very soon after, the church was not that perfect place that some might expect. Why would there be any need for this teaching if the church were a harmonious, peaceful, loving place?

The fact is the church can be all of those things but it often isn't. It is a family and like many families it tries to keep its disfunction to a minimum. Life together is important. Knowing how to confront one another in love can be the key to vital and sustained community.

But all too often, instead of speaking directly to one another as this text counsels us to do, we are more likely to tell 3 or 4 others about the awful thing that "so-and-so" did to us without ever feeling called to talk to that person directly and privately. Jesus' words are meant to protect the feelings of others and, as much as possible, to avoid embarrassment or humiliation.

The one-to-one is difficult, but important. Still, it may not work. That's when trusted friends are called upon for assistance. Taking witnesses is not only biblical, it is practical. It is just possible that the offended party got it totally wrong. The

witnesses might be just the ones to help them see things more clearly. Or, the witnesses may be able to get through to the offender in ways that the other could not.

But, if the offense is real (and bear in mind we are talking about serious matters and things which have the potential to disrupt and fracture the community of the church) and if the process has been undertaken in this biblical fashion with restoration and reconciliation as the goal, it is still possible that the problem has not been resolved. When that happens we are to follow Jesus' command and in essence remove the offender from the fellowship much like the way a skilled surgeon removes a cancer from the healthy tissue.

And then what? If the church practices Jesus' model for settling controversy can it feel comfortable and righteous in the practice of excommunication? Does that ever feel comfortable? Or does it feel like failure - a failure to love, a failure to communicate?

The church is called to a new way of life in Christ. It is called to exercise mutual accountability and mutual forbearance. Knowing where the boundary lines are for acceptable behavior is important, but there is something that is even more important and that is to keep open to the hope of reconciliation and to avoid writing anyone off.

We are called to model the practices and the attitudes that Christ gave us in his life teachings and his humble death on the cross.

I believe the church is called to value restoration and resurrection above righteousness and having our own way. I

believe we are called to continue to reach out to the one who may now be outside the fellowship, but who is nevertheless a child of God and worthy of the same care and love and attention that Jesus gave the tax collectors and the sinners in his society.

In a sense it all circles back, like the grooves in a vinyl record. When we allow grace to be the dominant attitude of our common life, we find that harmony we seek and the vitality that comes from acknowledging God's presence in our midst as the resurrected Lord who has come to make all things new, even when it seems like we are caught in a rut rather than in the tracks that lead to life, new life lived in a spirit of love and forgiveness and grace.

The groove of Grace is one in which we can all travel in safety and in the assurance of God's presence.

As we enter into the groove of this new year, may we consider how we can fulfill our calling as followers of Christ and members of his imperfect, but perfectly forgiven body?

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.