

It's like magic, isn't it? No matter how many times you turn or twist that smartphone or tablet of yours, the screen turns and twists right along with you, keeping whatever it is you're looking at right-side-up, no matter what.

Chances are, the first time you encountered this feature -- now standard on just about every piece of mobile technology -- it made you smile, or maybe even laugh out loud. Probably because we're not used to things righting themselves. Typically, if something's out of whack in life, we notice it and try to make it right. Perhaps that's what makes the screen on your smartphone so charming. It does the fixing itself.

Of course, it isn't magic that keeps our precious screens in sync with us. It's science. Inside your favorite device is a gyroscope, which -- when coupled with an accelerometer -- senses precise motion along six axes: up/down, left/right, forward/backward. It even keeps tabs on the speed with which you move. The result is a phone that not only keeps your pictures facing the right direction, but a phone that can track the number of steps you take while powerwalking around your neighborhood.

And I am talking about the amazing technology found in our mobile devices, because in today's gospel reading, we hear Jesus urging us to keep our relationships right-side up. The only problem is that, unlike our smartphones and iPads, we don't have a built-in gyroscope making it automatic and easy. At least that's the assumption. But it is my hope that we will learn to see that God's given us something we might call "gyroscope grace" that unfailingly, and without any merit of our own, rights us back up with God.

But getting *right with each other*, that's another story. Especially given the fact that in the family of God, people get sideways with one another all the time. Sometimes, it's over trivial things. Things like those snarky comments made at board meetings and the disagreements that revolve around how a monetary

donation might be used to fund a certain ministry project. And sometimes, we get sideways with one another over truly sinful and downright evil things.

Lies get told. Money goes missing. Power gets protected. Promises get broken. Affairs take place. Factions form. The picture is turned upside down and, no matter how vigorously we shake the relationship, it's not going to fix itself. So, in the midst of our estrangements and disputes we know that somehow, in some way, we have to take action.

Thankfully, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus lays out a basic outline for how we should go about making things right when we sin against one another. And what's interesting about his words is the urgency they convey. His first word to us, when sinned against, is to "go." There's no call to let the offense sit for a bit, or to gather advice from a gaggle of others before actually addressing the issue with our brother or sister in Christ.

No, Jesus is pretty clear. If someone has sinned -- done something to offend the heart of God and harm his or her relationship with you -- then you must *go*. Or to put it another way, Jesus wants the church to be a community of individuals who refuse to ignore destructive behavior. But, often times this radical idea contrasts with how most churches deal with conflict. Let's just say that often times the greatest spiritual gift at work in many congregations is passive aggressiveness. We pretend problems don't exist and hope they go away. The fear of making things worse, or of hurting someone's feelings, can leave us paralyzed.

And the problem seems to stem from a false belief that love equals a lack of conflict; that if love is truly in the air, then there will never be awkwardness or confrontation. But, in fact, the opposite is true. When love is at work, confrontation -- and the residual awkwardness or momentary ugliness -- is inevitable. Love, especially among Christians, is not just a heartfelt affection for one another. It is a passionate championing of the will of God for one another. Therefore, when we

see each other struggling, or feel the sting of one's sin, we *must* go, we must speak up. And yes, it will likely hurt. But all that hurts is not supposed to be harmful.

Jesus continues. He not only urges us to pursue our Christian brother or sister when they sin against us, but to do so by ourselves. We're to be a community of people who protect and respect the privacy and reputation of others, even when we're the victim. And if we are honest with ourselves, sometimes it's incredibly tempting to make others aware of how someone else has wronged us. It's easy to forget that Jesus' words *apply to all of us*, even if we may sometimes think that we are the model Christian or the perfect disciple.

It's only as a last resort that we are to widen the circle in order to get things right-side-up with our fellow Christians. And even then, Jesus tells us to do so progressively, first with "two or three witnesses," and only after that, to the church at large. It's clear that Jesus' goal for us, at every turn, is to mitigate the amount of damage done to offenders, thus making it as easy as possible when they repent, to return to a joyful life in the community of believers.

Sadly, however, it doesn't always work that way. Which is why Jesus lays out one final way to get things "right-side up." If the offender refuses to respond to the individual or to the group, then they must be given the opportunity to respond to the church as a whole. Churches and denominations differ on just how and when this type of thing happens. But no matter the form it takes, what Jesus lays out is pretty clear. In extreme circumstances, a boundary needs to be set. And that boundary for acceptable, God-glorifying behavior, although delivered by the church, is to be seen as set by God. Thus, the declaration that "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Ok, so what then is our take home for today. Well, you might say that the big idea is that, in calling a sinful brother or sister to repentance, the church is

simply communicating a standard, an expectation, for joyful, forgiven and productive life in God's family, and doing so on God's behalf. Therefore, if the offender chooses not to embrace that standard, it's not the church kicking someone to the curb. It's the offender choosing to walk away from the group or community. The opportunity for relationship was there and still remains, but sadly, sometimes people take a pass. Sometimes they choose to live sideways to God and upside-down with the church.

Thankfully, no matter what happens in the relationship we have with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we all have been given the gift of God's Grace. God's unmerited favor, that -- in spite of all the upside-down stuff we've done -- puts us right-side up. Of course, some things might need to happen, or are still in process, things like repentance, restitution, confession. But, no matter what happens we can trust that God's grace is going to get things right. God's grace will whip our world around so that things are aligned properly again. That's gyroscope grace. Very cool.

Dissension and problems in the community of faith can seem overwhelming to the average Christian, even the average pastor, who still finds it difficult to know just when to speak up in the face of sin and who is sometimes a little uncomfortable with the weirdness that comes with pursuing health and holiness within God's church and in seeking to live out one's faith. That's normal! And lest we get caught up in the details of just how to do this whole thing well, perhaps it's best to end by surveying the context of today's narrative.

Matthew 18 *is not a chapter about church discipline*. It's a chapter about the danger of sin and the beauty of God's amazing grace. After all, earlier Jesus talked about the lost sheep and of a Shepherd who will gladly forsake 99 to locate the one that got lost. He then goes on to share words about a servant who was forgiven a huge debt and how the debts we're called to forgive pale in comparison.

The good news of the Gospel is that through Christ our God relentlessly and generously "rights" the image. God is a gyroscope of grace and goodness constantly offering to us an undeserved place at His divine table. God shows us our sin but does so with compassion. Our merciful God does not whisper our infidelities to our neighbors but invites us to return and be restored in full. And it's like magic, isn't it? No matter how many times we turn or twist our lives away from God's will, God brings us right-side-up, without fail.

This morning's words from Matthew are not a clinical prescription for how we deal with the undesirables in our church. They're merely a call for us to deal with one another the very same way God in Christ deals with us; with a relentless, gracious pursuit to make things right.

Of course, it would be great, it would be miraculous if our relationships fixed themselves. But they don't. And yet we must remember that this doesn't mean we're without a "gyroscope," so to speak. There is a method by which things get "right-side up" in our lives. In our relationship with God, it's Christ who turns things around. But in our relationships within his church, it's his people who turn them around with the help of the Holy Spirit. And may we embrace that calling -- as tightly and as passionately as we embrace that tablet or smartphone of ours. Thanks be to God. Amen.