

Gyroscopic Grace

No matter how you twist and turn your tablet or smartphone,
the images manage to move right with you.

Thanks to a nifty little thing called a gyroscope, everything stays

"right-side up." Don't you wish relationships had a gyroscope?

Wouldn't it be nice, if, no matter how turned around things got,
there was always a way to get right-side up?

It is 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.

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's 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 power-walking at the mall, or play some truly immersive video games.

All of this is germane, 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.

We're going to see that God's given us something we might call

"gyroscopic 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.

In the family of God, people get sideways with one another.

Sometimes, it's over trivial things.

There are snarky comments made at board meetings
and disagreements about just how the youth
should fund their upcoming ski trip.

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.

We have to take action.

In chapter 18, Jesus lays out a basic outline for how we should go about
making things right when we sin against one another.

What's interesting about his words is the ***urgency they convey***.

His first word to us, when sinned against, is to ***"go"*** (v. 15).

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*.

To put it another way, Jesus wants the church to be a community of individuals ***who refuse to ignore destructive behavior.***

This contrasts with how most churches deal with conflict.

Let's just say that the greatest spiritual gift at work in many congregations is passive aggressiveness. We pretend problems don't exist and hope they go away. Fear of making things worse, or of hurting someone's feelings, leaves us paralyzed.

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 harmful.

***"Are we the type of people who will avoid speaking up
in order to avoid conflict?"***

Are we the kind of community that encourages truth?

***Are we rooting for the will of God to win out in one another's lives,
or are we focused simply on fostering good feelings?"***

These are good questions.

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.

It's incredibly tempting to make others aware of
how someone else has wronged us.

And it's easy to forget that these words of Jesus

apply to pastors and ministry leaders as well,

who often feel entitled as part of the job to let others in
on the ways in which a particular person in the church has wronged them.

It's only as a last resort that we 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 won'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" (v. 18).

The big idea is that, in calling the 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 health.

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.

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. Jesus has already talked about the lost sheep and of a Shepherd who will gladly forsake 99 to locate the one that got lost.

We then hear about the servant who was forgiven a huge debt and how the debts we're called to forgive pale in comparison.

This is a God who relentlessly and generously "**rights**" the image.

God is a gyroscope of grace and goodness constantly offering to us
an undeserved place at the table.

God shows us our sin, but does so with compassion.

God does not whisper our infidelities to our neighbors,
but invites us to return and be restored in full.

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.

These words in Matthew 18 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,
that is, with a relentless, gracious pursuit to make things right.

It would be really great if 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.

May we embrace that calling –

as tightly and as passionately as we embrace that tablet. Amen.

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