

“Community Life”

Recently, I heard part of an interview of **Gail Sheehy**, who is the **author of the book, Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life**. The publisher printed the following on the book’s cover flap: “At last, this is your story. You’ll recognize yourself, your friends, and your loves. You’ll see how to use each life crisis as an opportunity for creative change – to grow to your full potential.”

Talking about her own passages, **Gail Sheehy said on the September 3rd Diane Rheem Show, “you develop more self-awareness – you develop more compassion for others – these passages, when you are moving from one stage of growth to another you have a chance to make a real leap of growth”.**

As I listened to that author’s interview, the thought came to me that Jesus was trying to help his followers – his future Church **“make a real leap of growth”**. That was especially so, since his disciples had great difficulty understanding Jesus’ teachings and preaching, because his message and purpose was radically different from their previous experiences. They needed his help, so they could comprehend the meaning of his revolutionary gospel and his new way of living. **Jesus’ calling and his faithful response to it created constant turmoil and confusion for his disciples!**

Perceiving the disciples’ difficulty with comprehending his teachings and purpose, it might also be helpful to think of them as going through a process of development. I suspect a good number of us recall **Abraham Maslow’s Pyramid of Needs**. I have asked Mike to project a graphic illustrating Maslow’s pyramid.

Maslow argued that a person must obtain the fulfillment of the items of a level, beginning at the bottom or “Physiological” one before being able to advance to meeting the needs of the next level up. The top three levels of Maslow’s Pyramid of Needs are the ones which I suggest are most closely related to what Jesus was talking about in today’s Gospel Lectionary Reading. If someone becomes part of the Community of Believers – those who follow Jesus and who are part of his Body – the Church, then he or she is trying, at the least, to meet the needs which belong to the middle level of the pyramid, which is “Love/Belonging”, because she or he sees his or her self as belonging to the Church of Jesus.

However, the issue of having an orderly process to resolve disagreements among members of the same group, for example the Church, deals with Community Life and requires “respect” at least for the process of resolution, so it will be a real “achievement”. Clearly, Jesus intended the wronged person would receive “respect”, be “confident” in the process, and experience “self-esteem” as a result of going through the process, which Jesus outlined through his instructions for that process. Those needs are listed by Maslow as belonging to the second highest level of the pyramid – that of “Esteem”.

Still, Jesus seems to have intend his commands for his process to resolve disputes, to lead to the fulfilling of the needs Maslow listed in the top level – especially “morality”, “problem solving, lack of prejudice, and acceptance of facts”. Maslow’s “Self-actualization” – the top level of the Pyramid of Needs might better be titled, “Christ-actualization” or “Living the New Life in Christ” for those of us belonging to Jesus Christ and his Body!

Gail Sheehy says going through a passage – **“moving from one stage of growth to another you have a chance to make a real leap of growth”**. **Abraham Maslow’s Pyramid of Needs shows some of the specific needs, which one fulfills before being able to move up to a higher level.** The Apostle Paul, who, himself, went through a dramatic passage – transformation, before he could become Christ’s powerful Apostle to the Gentiles or non-Jews, described the **“real leap of growth”** with great insight. In Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians 13:11-12, he wrote, **“When I was a child, my speech, feelings, and thinking were all those of a child; now that I am an adult, I have no more use for childish ways. What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror; then we shall see face-to-face. What I know now is only partial; then it will be complete — as complete as God’s knowledge of me.”**

In today’s Scripture Reading, Jesus sought to enable his followers – members of his Church – the Community of Believers to have a **“real leap of growth” – a more complete “knowledge” about the New Life in Christ, so he teaches – instructs – commands, “If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back.”** Sometimes, a perceived harm is based on a misunderstanding – is not intentional. Especially in such cases, keeping the matter private enables the truth to be revealed, while reducing having to also deal with public embarrassment because a charge based on a misunderstanding was not checked out first.

Jesus knew there would frequently be some folks, who consider themselves to be his followers, but who would have not yet experienced the significant transformation or growth the Apostle Paul was pointing to. So, recognizing there would

be, on occasion, those still under the control of anger, greed, selfishness, etc., Jesus continued to give instructions for the process, saying, ***“But if he will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you, so that ‘every accusation may be upheld by the testimony of two or more witnesses,’ as the Scripture says.”***

Jesus further understood, some “would be” believers would still be in so much bondage to living the world’s ways of anger, revenge, and profiting from the pain of others that unfortunately, they would refuse to respect the process Jesus set forward for resolving disputes and they would undermine it and Christian faith and order by following the world’s deceitful and self-centered tactics, such as spreading false and malicious rumors. So, Jesus went on to instruct, ***“And if he will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally, if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or a tax collector.”*** Unfortunately, I suspect Matthew, who had a close affinity for the legalistic interpretation of Jewish laws, provided his own examples of how to treat those, who refuse to follow Jesus’ prescribed process for resolving disputes. It is clear Jesus intended, when someone continued to reject the result of the process, they were to no longer be considered part of the Community of the Church. **Our Lord and Savior wanted reconciliation and unity to be restored through the process he commanded them to follow but, if someone refused to accept the truth – the result would then either be the wrong doer needed to take his or her self out of the Church or be excluded from the Life of the Community, for the health, welfare, and service of the Church.**

Quite a few years ago, the elected boards of the Deacons and the Trustees set forth a policy for Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ, to facilitate our following of Jesus’ commands in today’s Scripture. You have a copy of that insert with your bulletin. We periodically publish this policy to aid members and friends, as we all seek to fulfill Christ’s process for resolving disputes in the Life of the Community – the Church. Our congregation’s specific policy follows the basic outline Jesus shared in the Reading:

1. If someone wrongs you – not if they act or believe differently from you but, instead, the individual harms you, then go to the person privately to seek an appropriate resolution.
2. Only after the person denies the truth or makes it clear they will continue to bring you harm, bring witnesses into the matter – the appropriate board.
3. If the alleged wrong doer – the harmer still refuses to accept responsibility and/or continues to create harm, take the matter to the whole congregation, so everyone joins in redeeming the person or in excluding him or her because she or he intends to continuously create harm and conflict.

Round Grove United Church’s policy also allows for a person, who claims they are harmed, to ask the Pastor to mediate the matter, especially, if he or she is concerned with how the alleged harmer will act in private.

Very briefly, it is also important to note the meaning and purpose of what Jesus said in the remainder of today’s Reading. Jesus continued, ***“And so I tell all of you: what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.”*** If that sounds familiar to you, that is because it is. Matthew reported it as part of Jesus’ praise and honoring of Peter because he declared Jesus to be ***“the Messiah”***. By allowing Jesus to be quoted saying the same thing as part of his instructions about resolving disputes, **Matthew acknowledges, the Church, in its many expressions is authorized to make the determination of whether or not someone in the Community is harming another in the Church.**

Jesus concluded his instructions about resolving disputes resulting from someone’s alleged harming of someone else in the Community, by saying, ***“And I tell you more: whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them.”*** I discourage us from understanding those words as a promise to fulfill our greed – to disclose a prosperity theology. Instead, Jesus promised, when, even two from the Community of the Church, come to God praying in Jesus’ name – in the Christ’s – Son of God’s name, then God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love manifested in Jesus Christ will also be revealed through them because Jesus – God’s Suffering Servant – the Son of God will be with them. For example, when we pray together – two or more in the name of Jesus Christ – gathered in his presence, he will reveal the truth – such as whether or not someone has intentionally harmed another in the Community.

Jesus the Christ calls the Community of his Body – the Church to Live as he lived – with a self-giving and sacrificial love – caring for the welfare of those who are harmed by persons seeking selfish and personal gain. Following Jesus’ example and Living in the Community of his Church in accordance with his commands – including his process for resolving disputes resulting from someone harming another (pause) is vitally important to our Community Life! Remember, **Jesus Christ – the Son of God will always be with us – empowering us to forgive and to be reconciled, as we gather in his name.** Amen.