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# Can We Talk?

Matthew 18.15-20

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 7, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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Imagine your life as a huge flat canvas. Colorless, empty. Dull as ditchwater. Then start playing with it. Put in some undulations, mountains – hard to cross, but with great views from the top. Put in some rivers and seas – dangerous but nourishing and full of adventure. Put in some light and shade, that give shape to the day. Put in some dampness and dry areas, that give seasonal texture. Add some life – some beautiful creatures and some mysterious beings. Now you have a world. Put in some obstacles you don't yet know quite what to do with. Add some features that look threatening but might turn out to have a sense of humor after all. Now you have a story. How are you going to overcome the obstacles while enjoying the beauty? How are you going to meet the beautiful creatures and find a way to live with the mysterious beings? Now you have a life.

Life as a Christian isn't all slamming down winning baskets and taking 40-yard touchdown passes and turning round to receive standing ovations and fighting off the autograph hunters. Life as the Church isn't a blank, unchallenging canvas. Things go wrong. People fall out. You get cross. You feel let down, and misrepresented. People get hurt. That's not a sign that Christianity is a mistake or the Church is wicked. It's a sign that the Church is real. Being a Christian is not a security blanket. It's not about making sure nothing goes wrong. Something always *does* go wrong. The key is what happens when it does. The key is about allowing our weaknesses to be turned into God's opportunities. This is exactly what today's gospel is about.

The first thing Jesus says is 'Sin is going to happen'. It's not a surprise, and it's not the end of the world. You will come to the office refrigerator and find that someone's taken that fantastic last piece of cheesecake you'd saved for dessert. You'll return to the parking lot and find your precious new car has a 12-inch scratch on the passenger door. You'll check out a new apartment and find that the landlord has raised the price after you thought you had an agreement. Your old roommate will come to visit and use a word about people of another race that's widely regarded as deeply insulting. It happens. Much worse things happen.

When it happens, Jesus tells us what to do. Don't try to ignore it, because you'll just build up a volcano of frustration that will erupt in the wrong place at the wrong time. Find the right moment. Don't mouth off to anyone else about it. Just say to the person, 'Can we talk?' And if they say yes, just say, 'D'you mind not using those kinds of words to talk about people?' Practice it, if necessary. ('Can we talk...') Remember, anticipation is all. Anticipate that things are going to go wrong, and you'll get better at finding the right words when they do.

Remember that Jesus in Matthew 18 has just been pleading with his disciples to become as humble as children. He's been reminding them that God longs to bring the lost back home, like a shepherd searching tirelessly for a stray sheep. In this humble, compassionate spirit, try out these kinds of phrases. 'I don't know if you realized, but whenever you talk about your husband there's always a sense of complaint or criticism. I think it's maybe supposed to sound funny, but it I guess it leaves me wondering if you two are really okay.' 'I find it difficult that you always say "I know" whenever I make an observation. I come away feeling like I've got nothing interesting to say.' Practice on these little confrontations, and you'll be better prepared for the big ones.

Jesus says, 'What you're trying to do is *persuade* your brother or sister, not to humiliate them. Don't see this confrontation as a disaster, a last resort, but as a moment of truth, backed up by love. Think about how you want the conversation to end. Not the other person saying, 'I now realize how totally right you were and how completely wrong I was' – that's humiliation. That's preserving the fantasy of your own perpetual righteousness. Think about how to get to words like 'I appreciate that, I can see what you're saying, I'll need to think some more about it... thank you.' That's friendship.

Of course, you may fail. Your brother may not listen to you, or may take offence and blame you, or may deny there's any problem and make you feel stupid for raising it, or may accept there's a problem but then do nothing about it. That's the point at which the situation has got bigger than just you and your brother or sister. That's the moment, says, Jesus, it's time to bring in others. These others may end up showing you it was you who was mistaken. Or they may help to persuade your friend.

If these others fail, it may be necessary to move to a third stage. This means bringing in people who don't know the parties involved directly. But remember, the whole point is not to win, not to humiliate, but to persuade, to move from face-to-face confrontation to side-by-side collaboration. It's about getting to the place where both parties are able to say thank you. And if all that fails, says Jesus, there is a fourth stage. The person should be treated as a Gentile or a tax collector. That doesn't mean that you never speak to them again. It means that either their faith or their lifestyle is so far from the truth that you see them as needing more than persuasion – they need *conversion*. And conversion is often a slow process that may best be facilitated by someone other than you.

In a moment we're going to commission those living in the PathWays House in the West End this year. It's not difficult to imagine what the subjects of tension in the house might be. "Can we talk about what counts as having finished the washing the dishes?" "Can we synchronize whether we each put clothes away in the dresser weekly, monthly, or annually?" "Can we talk about... deodorant?" The people living in the house could continue to hope their year together is going to be a fantasy of Christian community. Or they could live in denial and suppression of conflict until the volcano erupts. They could desperately try to restore a flat canvas out of their increasingly crowded emotional lives. But if they really want to discover the gospel at close quarters, they've got to find the words, "Can we... talk?" And what makes their conversation more significant is that what goes on in the PathWays House is a small version of the Chapel's growing relationship with Durham's West End as a whole. Remember, we have the PathWays House because three years ago West End residents invited us into their community. The PathWays House is the West End and the Chapel saying to one another, "Can we talk?"

And Jesus concludes by saying three things that put these interpersonal interactions in a larger context. 'Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven'. In other words, these confrontations, little or trivial as they may seem, really matter. They matter because they're crucial to building character, crucial to saving our souls, and crucial to building the Church. They're the mountains that turn our lives from a flat canvas into a gripping series of pinnacles and ravines. Find a way of talking about the little hurts and misunderstandings, and you'll be learning how to make a good marriage, a good neighborhood, a good university. Find a way of naming and addressing sin and resentment, and you'll be beginning to see how to relate to people who insult you, people who defraud you, people who ignore you. You'll be learning how to make an enemy into a friend. You'll be learning how to bind and loose.

Then Jesus says, 'If two of you agree on anything you ask, it will be done for you'. In other words, everything is possible. This is not a zero-sum game, where either I turn out to be totally right or I realize I was a complete fool and I'm going to feel like an idiot for the rest of my life. If two people are reconciled, if one says 'Sorry, forgive me' and the other says 'Thank you, I do forgive you' and the first says 'Thank you too, I never realized what a burden this was until you made it clear to me and now I feel I have gained a friend' – if you learn to anticipate and practice and expect these kinds of conversations, then there is no limit to what God can do for you. He can forgive. He can give you strength to forgive. He can give you the time you need. He can give you words to say. He can give you friends to support you, make you laugh, distract you, tease you, hug you. He can give you everything you need.

Just reflect for a moment how much energy is pent up by our reluctance to have these conversations. I imagine everyone here knows what it's like to drive to Alabama with the hovering question "Why are we doing this, Mom?", when Mom perfectly well knows the answer is, "Because Dad desperately needs to have a face-to-face conversation with your grandmother and he can't bear it so he's dragging us along to ensure we'll all be so busy he won't have to have the conversation." People move house because they can't face having the conversation they need to have with their next-door neighbor. People go to business school because they can't bear to tell their father that they really long to go to theatre school. People join the army because it's the only way to get away from having to continue living in deafening silence with their younger brother.

And then finally Jesus says 'Where two or three are gathered, I am there'. Jesus doesn't just give us friends to help us over the mountains and across the rivers of life. He gives us himself. He is the tunnel through the unclimbable mountain. He is the bridge across the uncrossable river. He makes the woman whose son had been murdered meet, confront, befriend, and finally adopt the boy who murdered her son. He makes a man whose wife had an affair seek out and come to love the man he had once cursed and hated. He makes an African

American civil rights leader in this very city befriend a man who had led the Ku Klux Klan. Such stories can take several years of pain and tears. They depend on God's strength, way beyond the strength of the parties involved. And each depends on one person finding the courage to say, 'Can we talk?' Where two or three deeply want to find forgiveness and reconciliation, want to meet God in one another and find an extraordinary friend, but cannot find the strength or the courage or the words or the way, Jesus says, 'I am there among them'. This is what I lived for: this is what I died for. This may take years. But this is what I am all about. I am there.

So what's stopping us? Why do we do we try to suppress conflict like a cartoon bruise, only to find it coming up somewhere else? Because we want to be nice. I think in North Carolina there's a word for it. I gather it's called southern civility. We don't want to say 'Can we talk?' because we fear we may lose a friend. But were they such a good friend anyway, if we couldn't talk to them? We don't want to say 'Can we talk?' because we fear we may have totally misunderstood and we'll find it's actually us who's sinned against them. Well isn't that a good reason to talk? We don't want to say 'Can we talk?' because we don't want to seem judgmental – but how often do we end up complaining to someone else and making it worse rather than sorting it out with the person themselves? We don't want to say 'Can we talk?' because we think it's wisest to leave it to the lawyers – but then we live as frightened strangers in the world the lawyers create for us. We don't want to say 'Can we talk?' because we're frightened that the other person may be angry or upset and we'd rather live life on a flat clean canvas than be real.

So why do we say 'Can we talk?'' Because that's what God says to us. God could have said 'I'll turn a blind eye to humanity gone astray.' God could have badmouthed us to anyone who'd listen, or kept out of our way, or just been coolly civil while everyone pretended life was supposed to be a rose garden. But God didn't create a flat canvas. God created a world of undulations and pinnacles and crevices, a world of dry places and fertile crescents, a world of beauty and danger. God loved us. So God said 'Can we talk?' In Abraham, God took us to one side. In Moses, God had a quiet word. Most of all in Jesus God came face-to-face with us, and found words to say uncomfortable things. But God didn't humiliate us. God came in yearning humility and in compassionate kindness. True to form, we got angry, we got defensive, we even got violent. God knows all about the cost of saying 'Can we talk?' The cost was the cross. That's how much God wanted to be reconciled with us, Gentiles and tax-collectors that we are. Jesus is God saying, "Can we talk?"

The question that remains open is, will we find the grace to say to God, 'Thank you: you've shown me the truth. I realize now that you've been a true friend to me. I'm sorry I was so blind for so long'? Can we respond to God like that? Can we become God's friends again? And can we hear the voice of God inviting us, the loving arms of God stretched out to us, every time someone says to us, 'Can we talk?'