

Acknowledging our losses

Tim Miller, Gateway Fellowship, 8/6/2017

Matthew 12:46-50 The True Family of Jesus

46 As Jesus was speaking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. 47 Someone told Jesus, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, and they want to speak to you.”

48 Jesus asked, “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” 49 Then he pointed to his disciples and said, “Look, these are my mother and brothers. 50 Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!”

Church is family. Today is a kind of family meeting. Here, in the service. And afterward, we will be having a very important family meeting a few minutes after we dismiss...

The last year for Gateway has involved significant losses of leaders. Dennis and Beth, Bob and Diane, Mark and Wende, Gerald and Ruth, and others. Each precious. Each dearly loved. Each for their own unique reasons. While each person leaving has their own and very different reasons for doing so, each loss is substantial. And we have been grieving those losses. At times, Carrie and my pain was so great we didn't know how to keep on moving forward. I am grateful for the voice of Jesus and the healing presence of the church body. As part of that process, we have reached out to those who leave, expressing our love, seeking understanding of their choices, and looking inward to see how we can grow and learn, but more than looking inward, looking Christward in order to move forward with hope.

Some folks left on good terms, with blessing, and we remain friends. Others left against our wishes, for reasons we do not affirm, and relationship has suffered through the process. There is distance there. For Carrie and I, this dynamic of people leaving the church — often at the cost of friendship — has been the single most painful aspect of church leadership. Gerald once told me that before he joined the elder team he thought I was tough as nails. After joining, he learned up close how fragile I really am. We all are.

But haven't always known how to talk as a leadership team to you, the church family, in a public way, about these losses. On the one hand, we don't want to throw dirt on people as we process our own sense of abandonment or betrayal, if that's the feeling we are experiencing at the time. Nor do we want to talk about negative things in such a way that we cast a gloomy shadow over church life as though God weren't doing many good things among us - as He surely is. I've always tried to focus on the glory and grace of Jesus because that's where the life is. But ... my mom said...

“denying other's bad feelings intensifies them; acknowledging their bad feelings allows their good feelings to return. (Gretchin Rubin)

We in leadership have had the opportunity to grieve together, to process together, to journey together, to heal together. And we haven't known how to best pull the rest of you into that essential process with us. As a result, it may have left some of you dismayed and without explanations, left to wonder, “What's going on around here? Is there something secretly happening that is dishonorable? What DON'T I know?” And, other questions like, “Who's next?! Is anybody staying?” Opportunity for distrust and fear creeps in when there's too much silence. Another thing happens that I think really grieves God's heart. The value of our stock plummets. We internalize a lower value for this church community, which God views the way you view your children. We imagine other congregations are healthy and strong and don't have our problems. The grass is greener, kind of thing. Someone told me, *something's wrong with us, if all these great people left!* Vague. Non-specific. Non-measurable. And predisposed to be focused on finding negatives and lamenting them. It can be a motivator for church activity, but pain and frustration and anger are not healthy motivators. But my point here is that I have under-communicated about these losses in the Sunday worship service.

On the other hand, over-communication might cause some people to check out from conflict fatigue or dwelling on the negative too much because *who needs more drama in their life????* Who actually wants to hear about the latest conflict every time it happens? I don't. Some people must feel they do since Us Weekly, and Soap Opera's are a thing, but I sure don't need any more drama. But my point is that **under-communication leaves empty space** which can become opportunities for the enemy to whisper plausible lies. Accusations are often effective at destroying love among humans, even if the accusations are untrue. Satan's name means accuser, so you can bet that's a go-to strategy of his kingdom. Please be very mindful of that. Be careful what you say. Be careful what you tolerate others saying.

In modern church life, changing churches for any number of reasons is pretty normal. People come to a congregation for a season, and they move on. I wish it weren't that way, but we are an increasingly transient society, and churches feel this most of all, because we emotionally invest very deeply in each other. Bob Aycoth like to tell the joke about the man stranded on an island in the pacific, who was found after years of living there. He took his rescuers on a tour of his little living space. "That's my house. And that's my church." "Oh. What's that other hut over there?" "Oh yeah, that's the church I used to attend. Terrible."

When people who have been deeply invested leave a church it puts an end to this mutual shared commitment to the central social hub of our lives, which leaves both the one who leaves and those left feeling uncertain about the nature of the relationship. If our relationship was built on both being committed to this congregation's life and work, does our relationship continue? Does it end? Does it change?

Leaving — and then resenting those you've left. Oddly, many people who leave end up feeling betrayed and rejected because they don't get the chasing after and follow up they felt they should have, but they aren't likely to get that when the people they left are feeling hurt by the ones who left that they assume the leavers don't want them in their lives anyway. Even efforts to reach out are sometimes met with defenses meant to justify the reasons for leaving, and some people convince themselves that the congregation they left was terrible top to bottom in order to not feel guilt for having abandoned the covenant. It gets into the murky waters of human motivations quickly.

Recently several people left with silence. I was processing how to love people when they transition away, and decided that I need to reach out numerous times to try to keep pain and the enemy from being the one redefining the relationship: "Tim doesn't care about you. He only valued you for what you contributed to the church. Your friendship was fake and you never knew it." So I reached out multiple times and my efforts were denied...until finally they weren't. Instead there was attack. Furious attack. I immediately passed on the messages to the elders so that they could help me sort through what was shared.

Even though I have a healthy team around me, helping me sort out interactions like that, the elders have said that they've heard my self-talk change as a result of two emails. Two emails changed how I view myself. All lies. All misunderstandings of my motivations coming from someone else rewriting their history based on their pain, and the negative feedback loop of all the unhealed wounds of their past whispering in their

ears in the present and hijacking their future. But knowing that didn't keep me from adopting their broken view of me. It's so easy to let accusations in.

I have been wanting us to get really good at knowing how to behave in a healthy and godly way when people leave. Communicating to them and redefining the relationship, and acknowledging the pain of the process to each other. I want to die with a clear conscience, not because I built up walls against hurt and didn't get close to people, but because I loved deeply in both good times and in bad.

I've noticed that our pain wants to rewrite our history and fill it with lies, and look for evidence we may have missed that so and so was a wolf in sheep's clothing. Don't do it! Don't rewrite history. And don't think that when hard things happen in your life that it's your fault for being too trusting or a bad judge of character or whatever! Don't do it. Treasure the time you had with people and be thankful for the time God gave you with them. People make choices. You don't have to regret loving them. Good eggs and sheep will hurt you. Your brain is trying to find ways to avoid pain again in the future, but the way it goes about that will not be the way Jesus tells you to do it. Don't let your pain rewrite your history.

Leaving is not always bad. Sometimes it is right. **But where relationship has been broken, we acknowledge that we are grieving.** You are grieving. It feels like a kind of divorce. My soul feels like a little child saying, "What's wrong with me that they didn't want to stay?" That's not Jesus' voice, but in a time of conversation with Jesus, I realized that my soul was feeling that way. These losses are the single most difficult part of a shared life of covenant. The temptation is to try to escape the potential of ever hurting like that again. Retreat. Build up walls. Distrust people and only truly love a few.

I'm not doing that. We're not doing that. We won't do that. We are declaring to you today that we have kept the doors of our hearts open. Open to the Lord. Open to each other. Open to those who left. Open to new ones whom the Lord sends. This is the way of the Kingdom. We acknowledge the temptation to walls and arrows for self-protection, but we knowingly want to reject them because walls become prisons, and arrows end up wounding our savior instead of our enemy. Our real enemy is never flesh and blood.

Church is built around covenant. The gospel is God's covenant, sealed with Christ's blood. Jesus joined us. And what God joined, let no one put asunder. We want to say to you that death or the call of God might separate us from you physically, but we will not walk away from covenant. We aren't going anywhere.

Healthy relationships are built on trust, which is built by practicing vulnerability and giving people freedom to disagree. I've experienced environments in which unity was thought to be uniformity, agreement, and control was given to the most afraid, distrusting, or emotionally unhealthy member. It doesn't work. Only friendship works. The kind of friendships that can lovingly correct and be corrected. Our team is committed, not to being professionals who follow duly established protocols. We are committed to being friends. To our kids playing. To eating, talking, playing, praying, singing, disagreeing, and sharing until we understand and appreciate each other enough to accurately represent each other's hearts to anyone who might not understand them. We are committed to giving and receiving counsel. We are a family within this family who is Gateway Fellowship.

I have no words to express the measure of love the Lord has given me for this little flock. You have my one life, Gateway. May the Lord prosper you for his glory.