

# The Edge of Harmony and Division

*Matthew 18:15-20*

**September 6, 2020**



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I don't remember who it was that first told me that Calvin is on the edge of Harmony and Division, but it's true. Division Street is what separates Zelienople from Harmony and it's right over there. So, quite literally Calvin is on the edge of Harmony and Division. I liked that so much that I wrote it on a lil sticky note and it's been sitting on my desk ever since. That is until now because of this lectionary Gospel lesson.

I've often told a story about 2 pastors, both of who wanted to move their piano from one side of the sanctuary to the other. The one pastor did it overnight and was terminated shortly thereafter. The other moved the piano one foot a week until it was on the other side 😊 and no one even noticed. 😊

Well, I found the terminated pastor's replacement. She had just arrived in her new church. An older couple invited her to dinner. As they tend to do, the conversation turned to church matters. The pastor had heard about a big fight in the church a few years earlier that had resulted in a split. She felt she could be a better pastor to the congregation if she knew more about this tragic event, so she asked. *"Well, as I remember it,"* the man began, *"the fuss was over the location of the piano. Some wanted it on the right of the sanctuary and others on the left."* Then she asked the logical question, *"Which side did you two favor?"* The older gentleman paused, scratched his head for a moment, turned to his wife and asked, 😊 *"Ma, which side of the sanctuary did we want the piano on in the big church fight?"* <sup>1</sup> 😊

Do you see it? Do you see how these pastors, how these congregations, who wanted the same thing, are on the edge of Harmony and Division? Today's lectionary Gospel scripture says, *"When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, God goes into action"* (v.18). That's Harmony. Equally as true is the statement that wherever two or three are gathered together, there's going to be disagreement and eventually, someone is going to be unhappy. That's Division. It's true in religion. It's true in business. It's true in politics. Ever since Cain and Abel, conflict has been part of the human condition.

So the question is, if we are going to be perpetually on the edge of Harmony and Division, which of these three pastors and two congregations should we be like? Let's pretend for a moment that instead of moving a piano, the issue was whether or not to obey *"Love God and Love the Other as you love yourself."* Which of these pastors and congregations would you want to be like?

If you picked first pastor and congregation and in the middle of the night moved from not obeying the most explicit command in the Bible to obeying it, you'd be right. Loving God, Loving the Other as you Love yourself is after all not optional, it's a command. But, again, all things being equal, you'd also be welcoming a boat load of conflict, you'd split the church, and your pastor would be terminated.

If you picked the second pastor and congregation and moved one foot each week, you too would be right. You might not have a conflict, but I mean come on. Do you not see the Purple Elephant in the middle of the sanctuary? And if it took you 50 weeks to get to the point of everyone agreeing on the most explicit command in the entire Bible, are you not basically paralyzed. I don't know about you, but that does not sound like a church I'd like to serve myself let alone invite anyone to.

Did anyone pick the third pastor? She sounds like a pretty smart pastor. She's asking the right questions and doing the right things. She is trying to find out where the landmines are before the next conflict occurs because she knows there will be a next conflict and she doesn't want it to hurt the church or sacrifice her calling.

So, she's getting out in front. She's cutting the horse off at the pass. She's following what Jesus is talking about this morning. Jesus says, *"Take the INITIATIVE." "If someone in church hurts you, go and tell him or her—work it out between the two of you. If she or he listens, you've made a friend."*

Gary Parker was in his first full time pastorate in Warrenton, North Carolina. One evening, he joined some other men for a friendly game of pick-up basketball. *"I don't know if the guys were trying to show the new pastor a thing or two or not,"* Gary reflects, *"but the friendly game quickly developed into an every man for himself survival zone."* There was one player who irked Gary with his overzealous attitude. About thirty minutes into the game, Gary and this other man jumped for the same rebound. As they jumped, he bumped Gary and popped him square in the mouth. *"The warmth of blood seeping through my gums convinced me to stop playing for the evening,"* Gary recalled. *"It also convinced me that Brit and I would never become friends."*



A few days later, Gary went to visit Brit to discuss the incident. Brit and his brother ran a trucking company. Gary confronted Brit with his concerns about his overly competitive style of play. *"As we talked,"* Gary admits, *"I saw much in him I liked."* Brit remembered the play that bloodied Gary's mouth. It was no big deal to Brit since he accepted injury as a risk any player took when he stepped onto the court. *"As I listened to him,"* Gary remembers, *"I realized that I had been overly sensitive because of my status as being the new kid on the block. When I walked out of Brit's office that day,"* Gary says, *"I walked out with a new friend."*<sup>2</sup>

It's a simple thing: Take the INITIATIVE. In your mind, think of someone with whom you have a strained relationship right now. It may be someone in your family, someone at work, or someone who brought a mouse to school. It may even be someone here in the family of this church. I beg you, as the new kid on the block who swings his elbow a lil when he goes up for a rebound, if I've hurt you or your loved ones please come talk to me. I can promise you that was the farthest thing from my intention. Do the right thing, take the initiative to resolve that strained relationship! No one can fix something if we don't know its broken.

And if that doesn't work, bring someone along to keep the discussion honest.

And if that doesn't work, love them and love the church enough to take it to the church.

And if that doesn't work, start from scratch and offer them God's forgiving love 70 times 70.

I'm fully aware that it sounds a lil cyclical like *If You Take A Mouse to School*, but if you take this seriously, and make a prayer out of it, God will bless it and make it work out.

Friends, even this divinely different, incessantly inspired, universally unique thing we love and call Calvin has conflict. We must take every step we can to move her closer and closer to God's will and we must protect her from the inevitable conflict. We do that by taking the initiative to reconcile each and every relationship we have at Calvin because she is on the edge of Harmony and Division.

Amen?!

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<sup>1</sup> Melvin E. Schroer and Angelo J. Mongiore, *A FUNNY THING HAPPENED*, (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1991), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Gary E. Parker, *THE GIFT OF DOUBT: FROM CRISIS TO AUTHENTIC FAITH*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers), 1990, pp. 123-124.

