"Resilience Through Restoration"
Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 8:15-22
October 18, 2026

Rev. Jim Cochrane
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Saint Paul, Minnesota

The richness of our differences and our individuality, even and especially in our "not so great" moments, is the key to building a meaningful, unique structure that can stand the test of time.

And there is absolutely no better shining beacon of that truth than in one place: HGTV's show "Fixer to Fabulous." We'll often put one of their shows on at night after a long day to relax, but it is also *wild* to see what they do. If you haven't seen it, the hosts, a husband-and-wife team, meet people who live in their hometown who are looking to renovate their homes.

And the best episodes are the ones when they work on houses built over a hundred years ago. They start with a blueprint, but as they open the walls to discover knob-and-tube wiring, long-abandoned chimneys, or unexpected ductwork, plans inevitably shift. I criticize the changes ("don't put the oven over there!" and "don't move the shower – it'll ruin the flow of the bathroom!") Obviously, it makes for great television, and I'm sure anyone who has ever lived in a house over 50 years old can commiserate, too.

It always gets me though. And I feel like I'm rooting for the wrecking ball then. How much easier would it be to just blast the whole thing down and build from the ground up, according to the blueprint, and simple and clean and new? But then they have the grand reveal at the end of the episode. And the vision and wisdom of the architect and designer, and the investment of time and energy and trust from everybody involved becomes clear.

And I get it. Every single one of those challenges opened new opportunities that wouldn't have existed before. Rewiring the house allowed them to upgrade some of the other lighting. And the abandoned chimney gave them brick accents they could use to deepen the character and historicity of the home. Every idiosyncrasy lends itself to a wholly unique, timeless structure. Every imperfection creates its own beauty rooted in realness. Every bit of rawness reminds those who walk in the doors that they are in a real, authentic place, rooted in reality, but somehow transcendent.

There is a beauty in real, raw moments that can't be manufactured or built shiny and new. And isn't that true of our life together, too? We are human. We try to do good. We try to live in harmony with one another. But we are also our own individuals with our own lived experiences and expectations, so issues will always arise whenever we interact with another person with their lived experiences and their expectations. We never know what's going to be in the walls once we take a sledgehammer to them. And inevitably, at some point or another, someone will get hurt. Someone will be offended, and the beautiful tapestry of our life together will have a flaw.

One of the biggest lies we can tell ourselves about our life together is that God expects us to live harmoniously all of the time. The last few weeks we've been talking about some of the work of seeking the Reign of God: last week Scott talked about humanity and the value we as created beings bring into that work. Another aspect of our work is seeking peace and wholeness – in Hebrew, the word *shalom.* But as Hugh Halverstadt writes in a book dedicated to faithfully navigating church conflict, he writes, "because God's peace seeks social wholeness rather than harmony, the pursuit of it plunges us into conflicts with fracturing forces within ourselves, our faith communities, and the public sector."[1] Halverstadt illuminates an important distinction in our work – our call as a community that follows Christ is to work on reconciling the church to God and to one another. It is not to

[1] Hugh Halverstadt, *Managing Church Conflict* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 189.

simply live in the absence of conflict. It is great when we can live together in harmony, but the real work of *shalom* is understanding how we work through our issues not if, but when they arise.

Jesus teaches his disciples, "if your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one."[2] But if they don't listen, he continues, you are to approach them with a couple of witnesses. And then the circle gets wider to help mediate the dispute until it is eventually brought before the entire community until the rift is healed. Terrifying. Daunting. And seemingly unlike anything our world might be used to.

Our civil justice system is rooted in the idea of retributive justice – payback for the wrong that someone has done - But what is happening in Christ's ever-growing ring of accountability is completely different. It is not a self-centered approach where I as an offended party need to be satisfied to achieve justice, but rather it's an approach that puts the communal fracture caused by sin into the limelight.

How do we build ourselves up and move forward as a community in the wake of this sin? Step by step, there is a focus on bringing someone back into the flock who has wandered astray. No mandate that the person be excommunicated. No punishment. No financial or social or theological penalty for the offending party. It is a process entirely focused on reconciling the one who has sinned with the individual and wider community they have harmed.

And it's not a one-off process either. If I have been wronged, I can't send off an email and say, "welp, they didn't respond to me, so I'm blocking them. I'm ghosting their texts. And I'm going to tell everyone else what they did to me." That is the easiest way emotionally. But the right thing (and why does the right thing always have to be the difficult thing) is to continue reaching out, working to heal the rift and find forgiveness.

And if I can't make this person understand the error of their ways, they are to be like a tax collector or Gentile to me. But that's not the permission for dismissal that it sounds like. Because do not forget that it was precisely these groups that Jesus dined with and called to follow him, lest they think they might somehow be out of reach of God's grace. The work never stops.

The challenge of navigating conflict faithfully is that it causes friction between competing selves: we want to be made whole personally – justified and seen in our righteous indignation – but at the same time we also know that we have it in ourselves to be fair and to desire wholeness in our world.[3] I think that's why its so hard to thread the needle of reconciliation between anger seeking retribution on one end and simply sweeping conflict under the rug, trying desperately to forget about it, on the other.

But this way laid out for us as a paradigm shift away from resolving personal vendettas allows us to step out differently, and it has all to do with how we understand the role of power in our relationships and how we choose to wield it.

If I were to sin against someone, there has been a misuse of power that has caused pain and harm. And the person who has been harmed, in systems of accountability, may have opportunity to consider how they might wield power in return. Will it be for retribution: to make the offender pay for the harm they've caused? Or will that power be used for restoring the community and repairing the chasm that has formed?

When we look at the life and death of Christ, we see the answer. The message of the Cross is not that power was thrown away. It's that it was used in a way inconceivable to the world – as a way to shine light on injustice, to give voice to those oppressed, and to extend grace to those who could never otherwise earn it.

---

[2] Matthew 18:15.

[3] Halverstadt, 191.

And that is an example by which the church is called to live. In fact, it even appears in our Book of Order. And yes, I am going to quote to you the Book of Order today. And even from the most exciting part – the discipline section. The very first paragraph – the overarching structure of our church's system of discipline, is one of grace. It says, "The power that Jesus Christ has vested in his Church, a power manifested in the exercise of church discipline, is one for building up the body of Christ, not for destroying it, for redeeming, not for punishing. It should be exercised as a dispensation of mercy and not of wrath, so that the great ends of the Church may be achieved, that all children of God may be presented faultless in the day of Christ."[4]

This is one of the most essential tasks in our lives and in our life together – understanding how to wade into uncomfortable waters – into situations in which people have been aggrieved – and begin to find a path forward that restores the whole of the community. That acknowledges the harm that has been done, but also wields power for reconciling rather than punitive purposes.

It starts inwardly with ourselves, but then it ripples into our churches when we are asked to name systemic injustices and find a path forward that repairs and restores community. And then we are called to champion it into our broader society. Because when we learn how to deal with conflict with one another in a healthy way, rather than blow up with vengeful rage or try to sweep it under the rug, we can begin to see how our differences and personal decisions impact one another. We can begin to see how complex of an interconnected web we all live in and how our humanity is caught up in one another's.

When we allow those small wounds to fester, those who might seek to wield power for selfish or evil purposes see an inroad for greater division and disruption. And so we begin to see how the small squabbles – how the Twitter fights that flash across our screens and the gossip mills in the corner of the room – harm not only those directly involved, but degrade the moral fabric of our society.

As Kimberly Wagner writes in her commentary on this passage, "This seemingly pedantic set of rules and regulations for communal living invites us to take seriously both the way our sin impacts others as well as our summons to restore kinship with one another."[5] When we can use our faith to name that as sin, we can begin the treatment of reconciliation. We can begin the process of sewing that tear back together, stich by stitch by hearing people out and rooting our work in love for God and neighbor.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard over the last year some permutation of "what happened to this country? How have our morals been torn to shreds like this?" As technology isolates us more than ever, as our phones and computers put us into individual bubbles, it is incumbent on us to remember the role of humanity in enacting the Reign of God. That with all our might we hold onto our connections to one another as human beings made in the image of God and guard them. Because those connections, when they bridge our differences and abilities and lived experiences, are the strongest possible anchor against an otherwise overwhelming flood of division.

Because when we learn how to work through conflict as a community, and when we understand the asset that our differences can be when united, we are an unstoppable force. That is what we saw during Metro Surge in January, when violent power tried to drive a wedge into the fabric of our community. When anxiety and senses of isolation crept in, churches throughout Minnesota filled to the brim and people from all walks of life came together to sing. Different backgrounds, different political affiliations, different vocal parts. But all united in the work of restoring the fabric of our humanity when at its most threatened.

In a collection of essays entitled, *How to Heal our Divides,* Diana Butler Bass asks:

---

[4] Presbyterian Church (USA), *Book of Order: 2025-2027*, D-1.01.

[5] Kimberly Wagner, "Commentary on Matthew 18:15-35," Working Preacher, Luther Seminary, accessed October 16, 2026, https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/forgiveness/commentary-on-matthew-1815-35-3.

> Is the American creed possible? That *e pluribus unum* we recite? Or are we forever consigned to the historical habits that confirm the *we* and demonize *them*? History reminds us that such creeds must be embodied in communities of practice, where we are called into a vision of human solidarity, where we make new habits together, where we establish peace across the most durable barriers, and where we get in trouble for standing as one against the political expediency of division…when I find myself in such a community, the divide in my own heart lessens. Something within heals. Creed and community remind me that changing habits is hard, and practicing solidarity involves wrestling with my own failures. But, with the help of others, each of us can mend the fault lines in our own lives and lend our hands to repair the world.[6]

Communities of care are essential to the work of repairing what is broken. And that starts with building a resilient, tight-knit community here first. Knowing and loving our most immediate neighbors first as a foundation. So today at the end of worship, I want to extend an invitation to us all to try something new. Let's call it a two-minute drill. When Aaron finishes his postlude, for at least two minutes I want you to talk to someone you don't know. Or maybe that person you've worshiped next to for years but have never known their name or forgotten it to the years. Today for those two minutes, grace is extended to you. I know, this hurts our midwestern ruts of familiarity, but this is the hard work of building resiliency. Of laying a foundation for deeper relationships.

Like an old house filled with idiosyncrasies that only appear once you break down walls, the harmony that we imagine in God's reign is not as pretty as we might anticipate. It is real, difficult work that is replete with conflict and disagreement. But it is by working through our conflicts that we can become something incredible. We can build a meaningful, unique structure that stands the test of time when we understand difference and power and rather than lead with punishment, learn how to dole out grace and reconciliation. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[6] Diana Butler Bass, "Why Heal our Divides? We Need to Heal Ourselves," in *How to Heal Our Divides* (Monee, Independent Publishing, 2021), 16.