

“A Hidden Wholeness: Creating Circles of Trust”  
Matthew 18:15-20

What does the phrase “Catch-22” mean? It came from a novel by Joseph Heller to express the absurdity of war. Parker Palmer explains it this way about the dilemma of a bomber pilot’s life, “If you understand the danger you are in and ask to be relieved of your duties, you cannot be granted relief. Why? Because the fact that you understand the danger means that you are sane, and only pilots who are crazy can be relieved of their duties. So you must keep flying even though you are crazy to do so!” Let’s watch a movie clip to show its origin:

<https://youtu.be/Unn8fgs8fao>

Catch-22 is a good image for being in community. On the one hand, community is where we get hurt. On the other hand, community is where we heal. We need community and yet community is not always what it should be. We are born to be loved and included and yet we often experience judgment and even exclusion in community to the point of not being able to be our authentic selves.

I believe that Jesus understood this dilemma fully well. In the 18<sup>th</sup> of chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. In church groups, we often quote Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three are gathered in my name I am there among them,” as if church groups or gatherings are always focused on Jesus and his loving presence. What we need to balance the picture for us are the verses before where Jesus talks about conflict and the need for creating safe spaces for gatherings. Let’s listen to Matthew 18:15-20

<sup>15</sup>“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. <sup>16</sup>But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup>If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup>Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup>Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup>For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Jesus knew the importance of safeguarding his community from the pitfalls of anger, hate, and hurt. He gave them guidance for responding with love in times of conflict to heal and to transform the way people deal with each other. Even his inner circle of friends had disagreements among them. Jesus gave instructions on how to deal with conflict through a step-by-step process. Jesus took conflict seriously and saw in it a potential for greater healing. First, you go and speak to the person directly. This is one of the hardest steps because it takes courage and vulnerability. We would have to own our own feelings without attacking or degrading the other person. It is much easier to complain, avoid, or gossip about the person who hurt us. The second step is taking another person with us not to attack the person or gang up on them, but to allow for a more neutral person to enter the scene. The third step is to have a gathering of the community to speak about

the conflict. This is another hard step because people tend to take sides instead of creating soulful spaces where people can be honest and loving at the same time, where the norms provide respect and dignity for all.

One piece that is often misunderstood is the end of the process that Jesus provides is not getting rid of the offending party if they don't reform their behavior. When Jesus says that they are to be for us like a Gentile or a tax collector, we have to remember that Jesus treated those two groups very well. He did not hate them. Instead, he included them every chance he got. What I believe this piece helps us see is that if the person we have a conflict with, is not willing to work through the conflict to transform their behavior, then more work is needed for building bridges with them. Just like the disciples had to work on building bridges to Gentiles and tax collectors, when a person remains stuck in their hate, anger, or abusive behavior, our work with them requires more bridge building.

Parker Palmer offers a practical way to be intentional about creating communities that heal and transform us, and thus help us find our hidden wholeness. He calls such spaces "Circles of Trust." Parker Palmer on rules for circles of trust: <https://youtu.be/2EbyAgvY250>.

These are intentional gatherings of people with ground rules that safeguard the soul. Here are the guidelines which I believe fit really well with how Jesus envisioned his community:

1. Clear Limits: You define together how long and how often you will meet and agree on the ground rules. This could be gathering weekly for an hour or monthly for half a day, or even two or three times a year. You commit to the rule of "no fixing or saving each other."
2. Open Invitations: It is not a "share or die" event! We only issue invitations, not orders.
3. Graceful Ambiance: The gathering space is important. "We seem to have forgotten that the environment in which we meet has an impact on the quality of what happens within us and between us."
4. Creating spaces that are open and hospitable, but resource-rich and charged with expectancy. In a Circle of Trust, we are invited to slow down, listen and reflect in a quiet and focused space. At the same time, we engage in dialogue with others in the circle—a dialogue about things that matter. As this "sorting and sifting" goes on, and we are able to clarify and affirm our truth in the presence of others, that truth is more likely to overflow into our work and lives.
5. Committing to no fixing, advising, "saving" or correcting one another. Everything we do is guided by this simple rule, one that honors the primacy and integrity of the inner teacher. When we are free from external judgment, we are more likely to have an honest conversation with ourselves and learn to check and correct ourselves from within.
6. Asking honest, open questions to "hear each other into speech." Instead of advising each other, we learn to listen deeply and ask questions that help others hear their own inner wisdom more clearly. As we learn to ask questions that are

not advice in disguise, that have no other purpose than to help someone listen to the inner teacher, all of us learn and grow.

7. Exploring the intersection of the universal stories of human experience with the personal stories of our lives. Guided conversations focused on a poem, a teaching story, a piece of music or a work of art—drawn from diverse cultures and wisdom traditions—invite us to reflect on the “big questions” of our lives, allowing each person to intersect and explore them in his or her own way.
8. Using multiple modes of reflection so everyone can find his or her place and pace. In Circles of Trust, we speak and we listen. We explore important questions in large group conversation and dialogues in small groups. We make time for individual reflection and journaling. We respect nonverbal ways of learning, including music, movement, and the arts. We honor the educative power of silence and the healing power of laughter. Together we weave a “tapestry of truth” with many and diverse threads, creating a pattern in which everyone can find a place that both affirms and stretches them.
9. Honoring confidentiality. Participants in Circles of Trust understand that nothing said in these circles will be revealed outside the circle and that things said by participants will not be pursued when a session ends, unless the speaker requests it.

I want to invite us to share where we might have that type of community which Jesus talks about and Palmer tries to implement.

We will close with a poem called “Alone” by Maya Angelou:

Lying, thinking

Last night

How to find my soul a home

Where water is not thirsty

And bread loaf is not stone

I came up with one thing

And I don't believe I'm wrong

That nobody,

But nobody

Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone

Nobody, but nobody

Can make it out here alone.

There are some millionaires

With money they can't use

Their wives run round like banshees

Their children sing the blues

They've got expensive doctors

To cure their hearts of stone.

But nobody

No, nobody  
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone  
Nobody, but nobody  
Can make it out here alone.

Now if you listen closely  
I'll tell you what I know  
Storm clouds are gathering  
The wind is gonna blow  
The race of man [The human race] is suffering  
And I can hear the moan,  
'Cause nobody,  
But nobody  
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone  
Nobody, but nobody  
Can make it out here alone. Amen.