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*Matthew 18:15-20*

*‘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. 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. 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. 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. 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’*

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The story goes, I’m told by a fellow colleague, of a church who had a long-time, beloved organist. She had faithfully served the congregation for decades, sitting on the organ bench week after week, leading the congregation in singing the faith. However, the sad truth was that she came to a place where both her hearing and her eyesight were so poor that it was clear to the community that it was time for her to retire. The worship committee and the session gathered to discuss how to move forward but no one could muster the heart to tell her that it was time to pass the baton on to a new organist. They were stymied, with no way forward, with no one volunteering to have the difficult conversation with her.

At some point, someone said simply, “Well, why don’t we just throw her a retirement party? Certainly then she’ll get the memo!” Sadly, no one objected to this particularly passive-aggressive approach to the situation and they announced a retirement party for the beloved organist. The party came and went, with the entire congregation in attendance to share their gratitude for her many decades of service.

The week after the party the congregation took down the streamers and reset the fellowship hall. The search began for their new organist. There was only one problem, the beloved “retired” organist, showed up the next Sunday to play just as she had for decades. And then again, the week after that and the week after that. She apparently either hadn’t gotten the memo or even perhaps decided to blatantly disregard the passive-aggressive gesture!

Therefore, the worship committee and the elders gathered again to strategize. Once again, they pondered having a pastoral but blunt conversation with the organist but when it came time for volunteers to do just that, again no one stepped up to the plate. Therefore - and I’m told this story is quite true - the church elders decided to *sell the organ* rather than have the tough conversation.

I don’t know how this particular story ended but I’m guessing it didn’t end well. And no matter its ending, the point of the story unveils a truth that Jesus is inviting us to wrestle with in today’s passage and that truth is this: we often go to extremes to avoid conflict and, in so doing, can actually do more harm than good for the neighborhood.

The very presence of this passage in the Gospels is evidence of at least two things:

1. Jesus wants his disciples to know that it’s not a question of *if* they are going to have conflict but a question of *when*.
2. Jesus wants his followers to know that there are healthy and unhealthy ways of dealing with conflict. I hope we can all agree that the way that particular congregation dealt with the retirement of their beloved organist is an excellent example of how *not* to deal with conflict. Fortunately, Jesus offers some guidance on a healthier way to deal with conflict.

There are a few important things I’d like to bring our attention to:

First of all, the hope of Jesus’ model of conflict management is reconciliation, not vengeance, shame, or judgement. Jesus’ suggestion gives the offender numerous opportunities to change whatever behavior is causing harm and his instructions to involve the whole body of the church is an absolute last resort.

Secondly, the surrounding context of today’s passage tempers any tendency you and I might have to think Jesus’ suggestion cruel, vengeful, or harsh. Immediately before this passage is the parable of the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to go find the lost one and celebrate its return. And then immediately *after* this passage is Jesus telling his disciples that they are to forgive “not seven times…but seventy times seven.” So given those bookends, I think it’s safe to say that Jesus is suggesting a rule of thumb for dealing with conflict that hopefully resolves conflict *before* it escalates to the level of bringing wide harm to any parties involved.

And though I don’t think Jesus is saying that absolutely every conflict needs to be resolved in this exact order and in this exact manner, I believe there’s some deep wisdom in this passage and I’d like to share with y’all two stories of conflict. One of them had a “happy ending” and the other, sadly, did not.

At one church I served, I said something from the pulpit that I thought at the time was a rather benign statement regarding one of the many culturally divisive issues of the day as it regards to our Christian faith. In the middle of my sermon, one of the church members, an older gentleman, got up and walked out of my sermon in a fashion that was rather…dramatic. And after that worship service I thought about today’s gospel passage as I was pondering how best to respond. I decided to take Jesus’ advice to heart and to reach out to this congregant for a one-on-one. For the record, I’m not suggesting that he “sinned against" me. One of the trickiest parts of this passage is defining what actually constitutes “sin.” This gentleman, from my perspective, didn’t sin by expressing disagreement (though I certainly would have appreciated a less dramatic expression of disapproval); but it was clear to me that there was a conflict that needed to be addressed.

And so I reached out to him and expressed that I’d appreciate the opportunity to listen to him and to be his pastor. And the congregant accepted my invitation and we sat in my office later that week. It should be noted that I had only been this church’s pastor for a couple months so I didn’t know this congregant and, if I hadn’t asked him to talk my only impression of him would have been that he was a crotchety older man with a temper. And, while he did admit that he was prone to a quick temper, I also found this man to be exceedingly warm, generous, and kind. He explained where he was coming from. I explained where I was coming from. He graciously told me that though he disagreed with my theological position on the issue I was preaching on that he nevertheless was grateful that the congregation had called me as their pastor and that he thought I was the right person for the job. The relationship he and I developed over the next several years was among the most transformative in my life as a pastor and preacher. It taught me that conflicts can be opportunities for reconciliation, growth, and mutual learning.

But it should also be noted that that is not always the outcome, however much we hope otherwise. Sometimes, despite our efforts to live into Jesus’ invitation to be the Beloved Community, we fall short. For example, just yesterday, at the Presbytery meeting in Burlington, we dismissed a congregation in our presbytery who wished to join another Presbyterian denomination over differences of theological interpretation. The mood was sober as we reiterated that we were a stronger Presbytery *with* them and not *without* them, but that we would respect their wishes and seek a gracious conclusion to the disagreement.

And, you know what? Sometimes it’s just like that. We disagree, we part, we move on, and we pick up the pieces and try to learn from that experience to do better the next time. Jesus’ advice in today’s passage doesn’t presume that we’re going to bat a thousand. Therefore, there are times when the conflict progresses to a point that Jesus gives this particular statement that deserves a little unpacking: *“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.****”* I gathered with about half a dozen of y’all this past Tuesday in the library to discuss this text and this was one of the lines that definitely struck a nerve with several of us, including myself. I suspect this to have been the case because, at first glance, it would seem as if Jesus is saying that there comes a point in the conflict when you have to shake the dust off your feet and part ways. After all, the cultural divides between the Jews and the gentiles were great, as was the same between them and the tax-collectors (some of whom were Jewish themselves!).

But, upon further research and reflection, I don’t believe that what Jesus is saying in this statement is as clear and straightforward as we might realize. It would make sense that Jesus were saying to eventually permanently sever ties with the offending party **if it weren’t for the surrounding context of how Jesus treats Gentiles and tax-collectors elsewhere in the Gospels!** It seems clear to me that elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus treats Gentiles and tax-collectors with kindness, dignity, and respect. We have numerous examples of Jesus crossing cultural and physical divides to minister to and with the Gentiles. And he even called a tax-collector as one of his disciples!

So what might a more nuanced reading of this text suggest? I believe Jesus is saying don’t be afraid to make tough decisions to protect the good of the neighborhood as long as every opportunity for reconciliation has been tried *first*. And even then, Jesus is saying, don’t be too quick to shut the door for all of eternity. Make tough decisions *and* be generous practitioners of grace. Make tough decisions as a community *and* respect the dignity and safety of all parties involved. Make tough decisions *and* be open to reconciliation down the road.

**Now, as a pastoral note, I must affirm that we make all of these decisions while respecting the physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of all parties, especially those who are the more vulnerable in our community**. Jesus gives sound advice in this passage but we must remind ourselves that conflict between members of the church can range from petty and relatively low-key to types of transgressions that bring about real physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual harm. This is why we, as a church, both learn from the wisdom of this passage *and* we have sexual misconduct policies and child protection policies. We learn from the wisdom of this passage *and* we pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help us address conflict in healthy ways particular to the situations themselves. And, perhaps most importantly, this passage reminds us that we’re in this together and that no one person is the singular arbitrator of conflict. That’s why we prayerfully elect elders to discern on our behalf God’s will for this church.

We do this together because of the last line of today’s passage when Jesus says “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” You see, this particular verse is often picked out from this passage and quoted by itself (which, in and of itself, is not particularly harmful, for the truth still stands). Where two or three are gathered Jesus is there among them. I’ve quoted this passage myself countless times in one-on-one pastoral encounters in hospital rooms, death beds, living rooms, cars, and dining room tables. Sometimes in smaller gatherings without the pomp and circumstance of our booming organs or our rousing sermons or our poetic liturgies, we need that line from Jesus to remind us that we don’t need those things for him to be present among us.

However, we would do well to remember the context in which that line comes to us; and that context is a frank discussion about conflict in the Church! Jesus isn’t just with us when we get along. Jesus isn’t just with us when we hold hands and sing kum-bah-yah. Jesus isn’t just with us when we get it right! Where two or three are gathered, there Jesus is! It is just as much true that where two or three are *arguing*, there Jesus is! Where two or three (or a hundred and fifty) are gathered to wrestle with how to live faithfully as Christian disciples in a fearful and fraught world, there Jesus is!

There Jesus is, my friends, when we strive to fight like a Christian. There Jesus is, reminding us that conflict happens, and that there are healthy and unhealthy ways to deal with it. I pray that gives you hope and strength this week as you navigate the many relationships that make up the web of your community, your family, your workplace, and God’s church.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**