

Year A, Proper 18
Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm 149
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Last week we heard a difficult conversation between Jesus and our man Peter. You'll remember that Jesus had been telling his disciples about the suffering and death that awaited him, when Peter responded—very sincerely, I think—“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!” Jesus seemed to jump on Peter with both feet, responding in words we would probably find harsh, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me....” In my sermon, I commented that in his human mindset, Peter must have been surprised and hurt by what Jesus said. I would have been! I've been on both sides of conflict. When I hear today's passage from Matthew, my reaction is to bow my head in discouragement and shame. Yes, Jesus, I'm guilty! I have sinned against others with my words and actions. And others have also sinned against me. I'm pretty certain that my behavior was inappropriate on *both* sides of the conflict. I'll bet I'm not the only one among us to have these thoughts. Interpersonal conflict can consume every part of our being. If breaking up is hard to do, making up is even harder!

Before we go any deeper into Jesus' model for resolving conflict in the church, there are a few things I want to share with you about this passage. First, today's lesson is one of only two gospel passages that use the word “church.” The other passage is also in Matthew. This might seem peculiar since we've been taught that the church was formed on Pentecost, *after* Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. The disciples wouldn't have known the word until much later. But our English word “church” comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means “assembly,” or “meeting of the people,” and that's a word they would have known.

Second, the words “against you,” as in “If another member of the church sins against you...” are not found in several ancient manuscripts, so there's a question about whether they were originally present and later omitted, either by accident or to give the passage a broader meaning. Some scholars question whether they were added later as a connection to verse 21 which follows today's passage. This is where Peter asks, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?” You'll remember that Jesus answers, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Third and last, is the impact of culture and context on this passage. In our western culture, we seek truth and adherence to the law, in a different way than the ancient Jews pursued them. We lean heavily on what is “right” and lawful, particularly as we're personally affected when rules are broken—whether they are rules of law or ethics or of socially accepted behavior. Eastern culture, especially during the time of Jesus and Peter, places a high value on every person's dignity, and preserving another person's honor. The Reverend Jin Kim, senior pastor of Church of All Nations in Minneapolis, asks, “What sense does a passage on church discipline make in a culture where church is often a place of self-sufficient individuals who gather for worship on Sunday, then leave to do their own thing throughout the week?” The Eastern perspective was influenced by a strong sense of belonging to each other, and a belief that you could have honor or you could have shame. Perhaps that will make more sense to us when we consider all the ways we refer to ourselves as Christians: as different but equally important parts of the Body of Christ; as members of the household of God; as sisters and brothers in Christ, especially as we are united in Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist. But speaking of each other in relationship and community doesn't necessarily make relationship or community our priority; we normally consider how we are personally and individually affected before we consider how our community, our church, is affected. The question, then, as we explore Jesus' teaching about resolving conflict in the church, is whether

we can put our own feelings aside for the sake of the assembly. In other words, are we able—and willing—to live by this Rule of Christ in our own lives?

All week I've been struggling with how to preach this gospel in a way that we can hear what Jesus is saying without being burdened by the baggage of our own conflicts. So I read the passage at the Wednesday evening Eucharist this past week, and afterward we discussed it. I was curious to hear how others would answer when I asked them, "Are you able to follow this in your own life? Like me, others admitted they could do so only with considerable reluctance, and there was a consensus that our first reaction is to withdraw, to back away, to take time to protect ourselves and "lick our wounds," to reflect and pray about how to deal with our hurt and disappointment, and discern whether to confront the one who has offended us or to simply let it go. There is risk in whatever we do, the risk that comes from allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, to be wounded yet again; and there is risk involving the future of the relationship. Each situation is different and not all situations can be resolved in one simple way. We have choices to make, including whether we will give or receive forgiveness.

It's interesting, but probably not surprising, that when we hear this passage we immediately think of our own feelings, despite the likelihood that all of us have been on both sides of conflict at one time or another. Surely that's a normal human response. But remember that as Christians we're called to live and act differently as we follow the Christ whose every teaching was counter-intuitive and counter-cultural. Does Jesus' teaching benefit the one who was wounded? Hmm. Perhaps through the process he describes, the one who was wounded is healed through the process of putting the other first. In order to confront someone who has hurt us, we must surely be willing to let go of the hurt and forgive them. The ultimate goal is reconciliation, achieved by speaking privately first, then with the company of one other person, and finally with the whole church. This is not about ignoring what happened, or about ignoring one person's hurt at the hands of another. It's about respecting their dignity and the honor of both, affirming their worth as children of God, and upholding the community's need of the presence and God-given gifts of both. If you're uncertain about why that's important, stop to remember how our church and others are affected—discouraged and disheartened—when members leave over disagreements and conflict. This is not a new phenomenon. And believe me, it happens in every church every where. Human beings don't always get along. But human beings do have the ability to choose what's important to us, and with the guidance of God's spirit, to choose the side of reconciliation and relationship.

The Rev. King Oehmig, an Episcopal priest who before his death wrote a weekly column on the lectionary scriptures, said that "Another name for "what binds us together" is grace: grace alone can overcome our need to be liked and affirmed, (a need) that perhaps keeps us from telling each other the truth in love. And grace keeps us living in mutual respect as a true community of faith."

Yesterday a number of St. Francis folks participated in Habitat for Humanity's Hammering for Heroes. It was wonderful to see members of our parish working together to help others. That is what Christ calls us to do. I have a theory that when we become too inwardly focused, when we neglect Christ's commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves and to care for those who are less fortunate than we are, the imbalance affects us individually and as a parish. We will never all agree and we will never all get along. But we can sure try. As Paul suggests in his letter to the Romans, let's "dress ourselves in Christ" and always strive to work with each other, not against each other. Remember his promise: whenever two or three are gathered in his name, Christ is among us.

Let us pray.

O God, you have bound us together in a common life. Help us, in the midst of our struggles for justice and truth, to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*