

Learning Brotherhood

Matthew 18: 15-20

It is amazing what we are willing to leave to choice and chance in terms of our children's education. We would surely all look sideways at any adult caretaker of a child who told us they had decided to let their child make her own decision with respect to what she learned about math or language arts. That's because we know that there are certain things that have to be mastered by everyone in those basics just get by in our society. For us education has become closely tied to the achievement of financial independence and material security. That, though, is a recent development. For many centuries, education was not just about succeeding in the marketplace. Education was instead grounded in a conviction that learning what constitutes the living of a "good life" not the what but the how, was at least as important as learning job skills. *Let us pray.*

God in Christ, you who set the stars in the sky and drew the boundary between land and water, help us to learn from your Son and our Savior how to be fully human. That is, how to love our way through the conflict that all humans, and churches, inevitably go through. Amen.

What is absolutely true is this. Our Savior definitely did not share the view that what constitutes the living of a "good life" was a matter of personal preference. His entire earthly ministry was concentrated on letting

people know of what the good life is made. He preached against the doing of things that separate human beings from God and one another. And he told us that one thing about the good life is that it is always, always, lived out in community. And, the community that was closest to his heart was the community claimed most directly by God, the group of human beings that became the Church.

In this morning's passage, Jesus lays out a way of dealing with conflict in the Church. As you surely know by now, for him, the way we treat one another is paramount. The way we treat one another, more than anything else, reflects our devotion to God. Thus, learning how to treat one another with care was not something Jesus dares leave to chance or choice. Especially in the Church that claims his Lordship.

Jesus knows that the church, as Scottsburg IN presbyterian church's mission statement puts so clearly is a "school of love, where Christ is the teacher, the Bible is the textbook, and the world is our classroom."¹ But we in the broader church, beyond Scottsburg, cannot be love's people out in the world if we have not learned to be love's in our first classroom, the home, and our second, the church. That's why Scottsburg's mission statement is followed up with this invitation to all potential disciples of Jesus

¹ From the mission statement of the Scottsburg Presbyterian Church in Scottsburg, Indiana.

Christ. Come, it says, come learn with us! Why? Because love is a learned grace, a gift from God that is learned only in a community that actually and intentionally practices it. It is not, despite all of our wishing to the contrary, learned by osmosis.

In his book *Life Together*, German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out the danger of idealizing the church, of trying to avoid its conflicts, or wish them away. I actually think part of the reason church conflicts can be so thorny is that some people assume that in church of all places, there will be no disagreements. Bonhoeffer articulates the danger of idealizing the church this way, “Those who dream of God’s idealized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge one another and even God accordingly. They act as if they have to create the Christian community, as if it is their visionary ideal that binds the people together.”² As Bonhoeffer points out, expecting perfection of ourselves and one another often does just the opposite of reconciling us to God and to each other. It instead leaves us feeling as if the church we’ve entered has no place for us because we don’t fit the

² Bonhoeffer, D. in *Life Together* as quoted in a sermon by the Rev. Linda Thurston preached at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church in Hamilton, New Jersey. September 18, 2008.

church profile according to someone else. Or, maybe even worse, that the church we've been attending for years has no place for the new woman, or man, who wants to join the property crew, or the women of the ELCA. If that becomes the case, that new people can't find a place among us, then we are not being the church.

And of course, equally as dangerous as expecting too much from one another is to expect nothing of each other, to forget that the good life, defined in the Christian Church as the cultivating the image of Christ in ourselves and in our community, is something definitely worth striving for. I think we do it inadvertently when we choose to avoid confronting someone who has hurt or disappointed us. Why? Because when that happens, we human beings are more likely to talk about that person, and the pain they've caused us, than directly to him or her. And, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that telling me, or someone else, about what Jane did, or Bob did, or Dave did to wrong you is going to do nothing to reconcile you to any of them.

An alternative for dealing with conflict is laid out in our gospel lesson this morning. Jesus offers a simple process for dealing with someone who has wronged us, or whose position on some issue we feel might hurt the church. Don't simply talk about the person, not even to the pastor. She is

not the great reconciler. Trust me on that one. Christ is, and he has promised to be among any two or three of us who come to one another in his name. So, instead, take your concern to the source. Don't talk ABOUT the person you are disappointed with, for whatever reason – talk TO them. Nothing can change until the person not living up to your expectations knows he or she isn't Right? So have that hard conversation! If the person doesn't listen after you tell him or her your what's bothering you, you still can't give up. No, says Jesus, this next time take two witnesses with you and try again. And if the person still won't listen? Nope. You still don't get to take your toys and go home. Sorry to tell you. Then you need to bring your concern before the whole church and have a difficult conversation that tells the truth in love. If the person still won't listen? Jesus has an answer for that too and it is not to wash your hands of the person or the problem you have with her. Then, he says, "let such a one be to you as a gentile or a tax collector."

But, let's not get too excited about that stage, the part about treating people like gentiles and tax collectors. See, we might claim, Jesus tells us if we have persistent, unrepentant trouble-makers in our midst, we should just cast them out of the community. True, we often do this with great gusto in our Christian communities, either going after others or quietly (or

sometimes not so quietly) ostracizing ourselves. Both things are harmful to the body of Christ and do not reflect our call toward reconciliation. I've heard over my 15 years in the church countless examples where the solution to a conflict in the church was this sort of cut-off. Situations in which the attitude resembles that expressed in an old Billy Joel song I heard this week, "I don't care what you say anymore, this is my life. Go ahead with your own life. Leave me alone."

But isolation is not God's goal for us any more than division and strife is. Unlike in the rest of the world, our goal in dealing with conflict is NOT primarily about justice or proving who's right. The goal, instead, in any Christian community, is reconciliation. In case you are doubtful about the definition of that word let's make it very clear reconciliation means "bringing people together again." That is why Christ came, to bring us back into communion with God and each other. And so, when we in the church continue to treat those who hurt us not as the world treats gentiles and tax collectors, but as Jesus treated them, ah there's the rub on the excommunication idea! Then we practice God's politics. Remember that from 2 weeks ago, that we in the church are to practice God's politics and not the world's? Given that we are to treat even those we view as very misguided as Jesus would have a tax collector or a gentile, that is we are to

treat even those folks as God's beloved children worthy of respect and time and attention and LOVE. Cutting yourself off, or cutting someone else off is simply not God's politic when it comes to conflict.

Instead, when we in Christ's church model a way to work through conflict that is honest, straightforward and respectful - when, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, we are able to do that with all who God's Spirit places in our midst – when we can point to those with whom we've reconciled in our congregations, and even to those with whom we have not reconciled, but with whom we have stayed in relationship with in spite of our differences, then, and only then – we become a powerful witness in our world of the reconciling work of our God as it is carried out in and through Jesus Christ! So. Now. May it be so. Here in this place first. And then out in the world that is so painfully divided, the world to which those in this church are to serve as reconciling missionaries on behalf of the living God. Amen.

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