

Where Two or Three Meet—There is Conflict

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Matthew 18:15-20
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Good Morning!

Jesus says “where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, I am there with you.” That is true and comforting. It is also true that “where 2 or 3 are gathered there will be conflict and that is a little more disconcerting.

Welcome to the 5th Sunday talking about conflict. We are still at it, even after Mariah gave us the “end all” solution which is, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all soul and strength and your neighbor as yourself.” Period. You heard it, she explained it, and so why are we still here? Couldn’t we look at each other this morning and say, “go this week and practice this kind of love” and be done. That would be a great short sermon and it would be inspired and inspiring! Right??

Unfortunately to work out this commandment takes a lifetime, to figure out how to love in the way Jesus loved is so beyond us. And so the work continues.

Another thing I remember Mariah saying about herself and we all identify with her when she said, **we all believe that being human the way I’m human is the best way to be human.** Got that? The best way to be human is to be human like me and when we find someone (like that might be difficult) who is different from me, they must have something to learn yet. We have this attitude that if you just watched me, I could teach you how to be human. I would get along just fine if it wasn’t for the rest of you humans.

Often in our everyday life where our conflict happens the humanness comes out in such insignificant ways, but boy they can cause havoc. Things like, “why are you driving like that?” Could you slow down, or why are you going so slow? There’s a parking space over there, much closer. Just the conflict we have around driving is a bit crazy. Anyone identify? And of course there are many other issues that seem important at the time but really, are they? Think about your own everyday life. What are the squabbles you find yourself engaging in?

To be clear this is not the kind of conflict Jesus is talking about in Matthew 18 or is it? While the instructions for working out of conflict are in verses 15-20, I believe these have so often been interpreted in isolation. When we look at the whole chapter we see stories of our humanness and Jesus teaching a better way. Jesus challenges his disciples to look deeper, to be reconcilers, for indeed the heart of the gospel is reconciliation, to be made right in relationships.

Jesus was a story teller and so I've chosen to take a brief look at the stories he told to see what we can learn about relationships. What is the context of this chapter, who was the audience and is there a progression?

I would encourage you to take your Bible or the device that holds your Bible and follow along.

Verses 1-5 Jesus uses an object lesson.

Jesus is talking to his disciples, his everyday people, (who knows, they may have been having coffee and doughnuts) people he knew well and they asked him, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Remember these are grown men. Now maybe they were disguising their question of their position by asking about the kingdom.....were they wondering if Jesus was the greatest, or maybe Moses, or Elijah? Jesus looks into their heart and knows where their questions came from. What they really asking is "who has the most power and status among us?" "Who is most important?"

I love how Jesus answers their question. He finds and sets a child beside him. Jesus must have looked at the child with love and then moved his eyes to meet the eyes of his disciples with the same love and says, "guys, you have got to become like this child."

Now, I don't think Jesus was talking about the innocence of the child but to the social standing a child had in their context which was the bottom of the social scale, they had no rights and were the propriety of their parents. They were acted upon, they were powerless, they carried no authority.

Can you just feel the impatience and irritation in those men's hearts? It must have been a big pill to swallow. Jesus says, "welcome one of these children, and you welcome me." While the disciples aspired to power and authority Jesus invites them to descend into humility. Humility is an essential ingredient in relationships.

The verses from 6-14 Jesus gives his disciples a mental picture. He uses dramatic language as he talks how we use our power with those who are vulnerable whether they be children or those who are marginalized in our society. He says, "It would be better for you if a great weight were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea if you cause one of these to stumble." Jesus took the abuse of power very seriously.

This verse and the ones following about chopping off body parts if they offend you or others, are the times when I ask, "did Jesus really say that?" I believe that Jesus is challenging his disciples and us that the way we exercise power is seen and determined by our treatment of and relationship to the weak and marginalized? To be maimed is better than to offend.

And then in Verses 12-14, Jesus tells a parable.

This is the story about the lost sheep. One sheep is lost, yes, the shepherd still has 99, but the task at hand is to find that one. To restore the one to the rest brings wholeness. The shepherd knows that the health of flock the is determined by the way he cares for and pursues all of his sheep, even those who find themselves lost. This is not about exercising power but to bring back to the fold, to pursue the missing, to bring back into right relationship? In conflict we need to move closer to each other.

Verses 15-22 Now Jesus gives instructions.

In view of this progression of stories, we come to the scriptures about how to restore broken relationships. We have often seen these verses as those used for disciplining one who has offended or wronged another in the church, but really these instructions are for any conflict we may have with another.

Many of us know stories of times where discipline in the church went badly, where people were disciplined in ways that alienated, hurt, shamed and abused. The pain of this kind of discipline can last a life time.

My father and mother who had been baptized into the Amish church were shunned after leaving that community. I truly believe that the church thought this would bring them back to the fold, at least that was the hope, but it did not, and I wonder how many are brought back in after being shunned. I remember needing to sit at a different table when the extended family was together for a meal. I'm sure many of you would have stories to tell of painful church discipline.

Jesus gives clear structure to how we go about facing a conflict. Even as I say that I think, if the instructions are so clear how is it that we have had such difficulty with it?

John Paul Lederach paraphrases Matthew 18:15-20 and gives us a clue how we normally handle church conflict, which may be why we have such difficulty.

I have added one word.

Matthew 18:15-20 the is from the "Normal Practice Version"

When you have a problem with somebody in the church, check it out first to make sure you are not alone in this problem. There is a good chance that if you have had a problem with this person, somebody else has as well. Go and pick a good friend who is likely to understand and agree with you. If she agrees with you that this person is a real turkey, then talk to some more people to see if there is broader consensus. If money, land, or inheritance is involved, tell it to a lawyer, as lawyers were given by God to keep the church honest. If a friend, a small group, and a lawyer agree, then tell it to the church, preferably in private to the pastors and MLC. When you tell them, say it is a

concern that you have prayed about for some time and that there is a group of people who share the concern. Do not tell it openly in a congregational meeting since that is volatile and could get messy. Truly I say to you, from that point on, it is the responsibility of the pastor and MLC to take care of the problem. Your task is to make sure they do it right.

And to that the pastoral team and MLC says: “No thank you.”

Be honest, how many of you have participated in any part of this kind of scenario?

I wonder if we saw conflict as a path of opportunity and growth, would we move toward it more openly and graciously. The path we have often taken does not work so well.

The instructions Jesus gives us are quite different than what I just read to you. Remember this is not about annoyances, but you have been sinned against. I understand that in the original version of this scripture does not use the phrase “sinned against you” but suggested someone is found to be in sin. This would make it not such a personal issue, but the instructions would be the same. Here are Jesus instructions. Let’s remember Jesus speaks in broad terms. His instructions do not take into account different kinds of conflict. If you have experienced abuse, esp. sexual abuse find someone to help you navigate the confrontation and working through the conflict.

1. Go directly, take responsibility for yourself, own it. Keep the issue where it belongs, between the two of you. This is not about exploiting the other, or shaming the other, but it is the sincere explanation of how you see and experience the sin in the other. Listen closely, this is about restoration and redemption. Be aware of your own anxieties and fears. Come to this opportunity with a sense of hope, a sense of YES, and a great deal of grace. Be aware that the other person may have a strong response, let it be and listen more. This is an opportunity to hear from the other. Listen deeper than the emotion.
2. If you are not heard, Jesus says take someone with you. Not just someone who will take your side and really nail the person but someone who can help to appeal to the person, to draw the person back to reconciliation. We still go in hope, we still go believing the best of ourselves and the other.
3. If after doing these first two steps you are still not heard and the opportunity for reconciliation has flat lined, it is time to take it to the church, or a spiritual body, a discerning body, to those who are invested in each person’s welfare. This discerning body must advocate for both offender and the victim as they listen, ask for accountability, repentance, justice and forgiveness. Each situation needs to be held prayerfully, and taking it to a larger audience needs to be done with great care. This is still where we hope

and pray for reconciliation. It continues to be the place where we are moving toward each other.

If the offender does not see his or her error then they are to be treated as an outsider, or someone who needs to be redeemed. Hmmmm, and what does that mean?

Here is where I think we have often blundered in our relationship to those who have not been restored. Here is where we have to often have said in essence, “you are not one of us, you are outside of us, we will shun you, we will not have anything to do with you, you are there and we are here.” This feels like punishment not a means to reconciliation. As we can see the progression in Jesus teaching we see him trying to move people toward each other in each step, so I don’t think Jesus would now instruct us to cut off the relationship, but to continue to move toward each other.

As Menno Simons writes “We do not want to expel any, but rather to receive; not to amputate, but rather to heal; not to discard, but rather to win back; not to grieve, but rather to comfort; not to condemn, but rather to save.”

If the church community could support both victim and offender in a restorative way, cooperating with the grace and forgiveness of God, we would find that indeed conflict would be turned on its head and the opportunity for deep growth would occur.

And let’s also remind ourselves how Jesus related to the outsider, the sinner. He ate with them, he listened, he loved them, and he valued them. Jesus modeled for us how we should relate to the outsider, the offender and the marginalized. Jesus did not move away from the other but toward them.

Now in verses 21 & 22 there is direct communication with one disciple.

It is fascinating that right after this teaching about restoring the relationship, about reconciliation, it appears that Peter asked a question which is one we may ask as well. “Lord, if another member of the church” sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Can’t you just see Jesus rolling his eyes (at least that’s what I would do) and saying to Peter, “come on brother, not 7 times but 77 times, stop counting.” You forgive as you wish to be forgiven.

Verses 21-35 Jesus ends with another parable.

This is the saga of the unforgiving servant. One in power asks and receives forgiveness of the king and is forgiven much and then turns around and refuses to forgive one who owes him little.

This is a disturbing story, but one that is repeated in society and unfortunately in the church as well. We have been forgiven much, can we find the grace to forgive those

who have offended us? Can we the church practice transformation and restoration of relationships in light of all that we have received, all that we have been forgiven of?

Mathew 18 begins with the question of status and position and ends with the dilemma of money and power.

Jesus takes his audience, the disciples through a journey of stories where power and authority is questioned, where the lowly ones are esteemed, where we are admonished to be careful not to offend. He continues claiming the value of each person, honoring the offender with careful confrontation, love and grace, and then an ends with the example of how to give mercy and grace to another, knowing we have received the same.

These were stories the disciples understood. What are our stories?

We are all pretty normal when it comes to conflict. We all participate in it, whether we admit it or not.

Conflict offers us the opportunity to change, to grow and to learn something new about ourselves, the other and God. It is normal to have conflict.

WE stand on holy ground as we work through conflict, giving and receiving grace, covering it all with forgiveness. This is the place where God meets us, and offers a new way of living and loving.

Yes where two or three of us are gathered in Jesus name, whether in peace or conflict, truly he will be with us.

Amen