

Rules for Living in Harmony

Matthew 18:15-20

There is a television commercial which I must confess that don't even remember what is being advertized. A woman comes to visit a new neighbor. She says she has brought a pie so she can check out the newcomer and be nosey. The other woman welcomes her in to find out as much as she can. Later in the program the sequel is aired. The newcomer says to the nosey neighbor that the interview is over – the commercial ends by saying: wouldn't it be nice if everyone said what they meant and meant what they say.

In our scripture today Jesus tells us we need to be clear with one another when we disagree. Be clear in our communications – don't beat around the bush. We are members of the church – the body of Christ – and we are to do everything in our power to stay in good relationship and communication with each other. Unfortunately, this seems to be a particularly difficult thing to do and this passage seems to be difficult for us to digest in the Western church. Influenced by the Enlightenment philosophy of John Locke, the dominant understanding of the local church in the modern world has been that of a voluntary association of autonomous individuals. This is especially the case in America, where individualism, with its emphasis on independence, self-reliance, and individual authority, is so highly esteemed. 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?

This passage begins to make more sense, however, if we begin with the apostle Paul's understanding of the church as a body, where one part of the body cannot say to another part of the body, "I have no need of you" (1 Cor. 12:12-26). For Paul, in direct contrast to John Locke, the church is a place of mutual interdependence, where each member is incomplete without the other, where the suffering of one is the suffering of all, and where the honor of one leads to the rejoicing of all. This also means that conflict between members not only affects the individuals involved but infects the entire community. Where members are bound together as a part of the body of Christ, the disunity between a few is the disunity of all.

Many of us know all too well how painful church conflict can be, and we know some who have left the church out of a sense of betrayal and protest. They say: "We might have conflict in our family, workplace, or school, but how can we have it in the church? We're supposed to be Christians!" In our passage, however, Jesus seems to assume that there will be conflict among his followers. What makes us Christian is not *whether* or not we fight, disagree, or wound one another, but *how* we go about addressing and resolving these issues.

Of course, we are not supposed to have conflict as the world has it—through yelling, slandering, gossiping, humiliating, or even taking each other to court—but neither are we to sweep everything under the rug as if conflict does not exist, smiling on the outside while hating on the inside. Instead, Jesus calls his followers to the higher task of reconciliation and provides a way to carry it out when divisions inevitably arise.

Jesus began by instructing his followers to attempt to reconcile with the offending party one on one, this is where that truth telling comes in. Western cultures tend to value technical and juridical honesty above all else, while

Eastern cultures place higher value on the other person's dignity. For Western cultures, the "truth" is most important; for Eastern cultures, preserving the other's honor is most important. These are the extremes that are to be avoided and the tensions that are to be navigated when seeking reconciliation. We first honor the other person by speaking the truth in love, pouring our whole selves into the process for the sake of our relationship and the community as a whole. It is only if we have exhausted ourselves and are unable to break through that we bring the conflict to others in the church, which is available as a communal resource of discernment and guidance.

This passage can easily become dangerous and abusive if it is interpreted in the context of either individualism or legalism, both of which can result in the attempted control and manipulation of the offender due to a sense of victimization. When reconciliation is pursued in a discerning community that recognizes the inherent interdependence of its members, then conflict can be brought forward to two or three other individuals within the congregation, often elders or pastors. If there is not repentance at this point and the conflict is beginning to cause grave harm to the whole body, then, as a last resort, it must be brought before the whole church.

Finally, if the offending member still refuses to repent, submit, and be accountable to the authority and discernment of the whole community, then that person has revealed himself or herself "as a Gentile and a tax collector" (v. 17). Those who are no longer willing to be a part of the body fellowship should be loosed from membership.

When we enter into membership in Christian community, we bind ourselves to one another with Christ as our head. Furthermore, the fact that we risk relationships with people outside of our own gender, nationality, language, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status is precisely what makes us

Christians. The overcoming of such differences is what distinguishes us from the world, which organizes around sameness. We are not free *from* each other; we are free *in* each other. In other words, we are most free when we bring in the collective wisdom and discernment of the whole diverse body of Christ together. **Jin S. Kim**

Church conflict is nothing new; it has marred Christian community from the time of Jesus. Today church leaders often look to social science resources to "manage" or "mediate" or "resolve" differences among members. If someone feels that another member has treated her poorly, offended her in some way, she could seek the pastor's counsel, which might include psychological insight into the behavioral dynamics according to family-systems theory.

Such methods are helpful. In fact, Jesus seems extremely wise by these standards in the program he sets forth. Jesus speaks here not of honest differences of opinion but of a fellow Christian who "sins against you" by some self-serving behavior that breaks the unity of fellowship in Christ. When church members injure one another, it is not merely an individual personal offense: it is a harming the body of Christ.

If one first goes directly to the other person and "points out the fault when the two of you are alone," in a humble, loving manner, then perhaps confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation may occur. Failing that, if the barrier remains, the second step is to approach the offending person with "one or two others," to benefit from outside perspectives and avoid misunderstandings or later manipulation of who said what. If the offender is obstinate, then it is time to "tell it to the church" for a public airing of the issue and resolution. Each step outlined by Jesus is to be undertaken in the hope of healing and restoration.

In contemporary North American church life, these hurts are commonly dealt with by one or more people leaving the church in anger, joining another church down the street or dropping out altogether. In either case, pain and even death have dominion. The congregation and those involved may carry scars for years to come. God's grace is thwarted among the very people called to extend that grace to the world.

What should the church do when reconciliation proves impossible because an offending person insists on his or her own way? Jesus' answer: "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." We usually hear this as license to excommunicate, exile, or otherwise shun the individual. That would be the commonsense approach, to shake off the dust from one's feet, to wash one's hands of the person, and move on. However, since Jesus often interacted with Gentiles, tax collectors, prostitutes, and other unsavory outsiders, we must think more deeply about his meaning.

Religious leaders were outraged that Jesus at every turn extended himself graciously to such people in the name of his and their religion, even eating and drinking with them. They ridiculed Jesus as "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matt. 11:19). So, far from shunning them, Jesus commands us never to give up on them, never to stop reaching out in love to them, always to yearn for grace to restore what has been broken.

The rest of the world writes people off when things reach a certain point. It is true Jesus said, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (v. 18). In light of his teaching on life in the church as the locus of God's mission in the world, and this verse's echo of the Lord's Prayer (God's will being done "on earth as it is in heaven"), Jesus is telling us: if we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it? When just two or three believers—will

agree in Christ and seek prayerfully to do the will of God, then God will respond. **Charles Hambrick-Stowe**

The ministry of reconciliation must be at the heart of any Christian community's mission. The church has not been given the power to "bind" and to "loose" (v. 18) because it is always right, but because our mission is one of confession, restoration, and reconciliation when offenses and divisions occur. This requires leadership that confesses in real time before the community, seeking collective accountability and correction as it returns the favor to the church body.

The church is any place where two or three or more people live together in mutual interdependence under Christ. This requires casting off the yoke of individualism, which results in alienation, loneliness, anxiety, and distrust, into a profound trust of and commitment to people different from ourselves. This means that there will be conflict, but it is precisely through conflict that we model for the world how to bind and loose one another appropriately. Thereby we witness to the world Christ's ministry of reconciliation, which overcomes all divisions through the power of the cross. **Jin S. Kim**

Will we follow Jesus' instructions and learn to live in harmony?

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).