

Where Two or Three Are Gathered

Matthew 18:15-20

Have you ever watched the Jerry Springer Show. I did not see it often, but it seemed to me it was always about outrageous fights done in public for the entertainment of the viewing audience. We hope and pray these were paid actors. But we know there are fights that are not play acting. Many know too well how painful church conflict can be, and some have left the church out of a sense of betrayal and protest: "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 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, death still has 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. In this 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.

This passage comes in the middle of a larger section in which Jesus deals with matters related to life in the church. Prominent leaders who considered themselves "greatest in the kingdom of heaven" are instructed to have the humble status of a child and serve among the lowly (Matt. 18:1-5); disciples must avoid behavior that "put[s] a stumbling block" in the path of fellow believers (18:6-7), becoming radically painstaking about personal morality (18:8-9); believers must care diligently for one another so that not one will

be lost (18:10-14); and fellowship in Christ requires constant and boundless self-control, forgiving one another "seventy times seven" if necessary (18:21-35). In this context Jesus addresses the question of what to do when "a brother or sister;" "another member of the church" "sins against you" (v. 15).

The nature of the church of which Jesus speaks reminds us of Paul's image of the body of Christ, 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). 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. Where members are bound together as a part of the body of Christ, the disunity between a few is the disunity of all. Each member is of great value, and no member may be considered superior to any others. The church is a fellowship of believers united with one another in Jesus Christ under his headship, obeying the rules of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Church conflict is nothing new; it has marred Christian community from the time of Jesus. So Jesus instructs us to dealing with conflicts. Jesus says when one of us sins against another member of the church, like the offenses summarized in the Ten Commandments, or any self-serving behavior that breaks the unity of fellowship in Christ, there are steps to bring us to healing and restoration. Go first directly to the other person and "point out the fault when the two of you are alone." If this is done in a humble, loving manner, then perhaps confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation may occur. Failing that, if the barrier remains, a 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.

What should the church do when resurrection proves impossible because an offending person insists on his or her own way? Jesus' answer is not as simple as it may seem: "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Churches usually hear this as license to excommunicate, exile, or otherwise shun the individual. That would be the commonsense approach, wash one's hands of the person, and move on. However, Jesus often interacted with Gentiles, tax collectors, prostitutes, and other unsavory outsiders. 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). What else can we conclude than that, 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. In the next few verses, Peter needed to make sure he had heard correctly. "Lord, if a brother sins against me how often should I forgive?" Jesus' "seventy times seven" response means "as long as it takes" (vv. 21-22). **Charles Hambrick-Stowe**

A story is told by Max Lucado in the book *Stories for the Heart* that I hope illustrates how we in the church are family and bound to one another even when there is a breach:

The small house was simple but adequate. It consisted of one large room on a dusty street. Its red-tiled roof was one of many in this poor neighborhood on the outskirts of the Brazilian village. It was a comfortable home. Marla and her daughter, Christina, had done what they could to add color to the gray walls and warmth to the hard dirt floor: an old calendar, a faded photograph of a relative, a

wooden crucifix. The furnishings were modest: a pallet on either side of the room, a washbasin, and a wood-burning stove.

Maria's husband had died when Christina was an infant. The young mother, stubbornly refusing opportunities to remarry, got a job and set out to raise her young daughter. And now, fifteen years later, the worst years were over. Though Marla's salary as a maid afforded few luxuries, it was reliable and it did provide food and clothes. And now Christina was old enough to get a job and help out.

Some said Christina got her independence from her mother. She recoiled at the traditional idea of marrying young and raising a family. Not that she couldn't have had her pick of husbands. Her olive skin and brown eyes kept a steady stream of prospects at her door. She had an infectious way of throwing her head back and filling the room with laughter. She also had that rare magic some women have that makes every man feel like a king just by being near them. But it was her spirited curiosity that made her keep all the men at arm's length.

She spoke often of going to the city. She dreamed of trading her dusty neighborhood for exiting avenues and city life. Just the thought of this horrified her mother. Marla was always quick to remind Christina of the harshness of the streets. "People don't know you there. Jobs are scarce and the life is cruel. And besides, if you went there, what would you do for a living?"

Maria knew exactly what Christina would do, or would have to do for a living. That's why her heart broke when she awoke one morning to find her daughter's bed empty. Maria knew immediately where her daughter had gone. She also knew immediately what she must do to find her. She quickly threw some clothes in a bag, gathered up all her money, and ran out of the house.

On her way to the bus stop she entered a drugstore to get one last thing. Pictures. She sat in the photograph booth, closed the curtain, and spent all she could on pictures. With her purse full of small black and white photos, she boarded the next bus to Rio de Janeiro.

Maria knew that Christina had no way of earning money. She also knew that her daughter was too stubborn to give up. When pride meets hunger, a human will do things that were before unthinkable. Knowing this, Maria began her search. Bars, hotels, nightclubs, any place with the reputation for street walkers or prostitutes. She went to them all. And at each place she left her

picture – taped to a bathroom mirror, tacked to a hotel bulletin board, fastened to a corner phone booth. And on the back of each photo she wrote a note.

It wasn't too long before both the money and the pictures ran out, and Maria had to go home. The weary mother wept as the bus began its long journey to her small village.

It was a few weeks later that young Christina descended the hotel stairs. Her young face was tired. Her brown eyes no longer danced with youth but spoke of pain and fear. Her laughter was broken. Her dream had become a nightmare. A thousand times over she had longed to trade these countless beds for her secure pallet. Yet the little village was, in too many ways, too far away.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes noticed a familiar face. She looked again, and there on the lobby mirror was a small picture of her mother. Christina's eyes burned and her throat tightened as she walked across the room and removed the small photo. Written on the back was this compelling invitation. "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home."

She did.

The rest of the world writes people off when things reach a certain point. Jesus' saying, "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 center 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 seems to mean: if we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it? If the church—no matter how small, even just two or three believers—will agree in Christ and seek prayerfully to do the will of God, then God will respond. The church will really be the church, because Jesus will be present. **Charles Hambrick-Stowe and Jin S. Kim**

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).