

"Life Together"
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Readings: Matthew 18: 15-20

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Listen to the Word of God

'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in

heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

What do you do when tension and conflict grows between you and another friend, sibling, colleague or even a larger community? Do you flee or do you fight? Do you tend to walk away from someone that hurts your feelings, mull over it for days, complain about her to another person, and potentially even gossip about the person until the conflict "goes away" – *OR* – do you immediately get angry, confront the person, defend your case, and accuse him of sinning against you until he caves in, admits he was wrong and apologizes? The simpler question is: do you *Avoid* or do you *Confront* conflict when someone pisses you off?

I asked this question on our pastor's blog, and I ask again this morning, because while these are two extreme responses on how we might react to a relationship that has gone sour, most of us probably relate to either one

of these two responses: Flight or Fight. After all, the many reality TV shows – to name a few, The Bachelor, Dr. Phil, The Apprentice – they all evidently show how much drama there is when two or more people circumvent and bump heads, avoid and confront, flee without any resolution and fight until they win the battle. The drama never ends. They only get worse as each episode unravels.

Life together is not easy. Broken friendships reveal this. War confirms this. Our Bible speaks to this. It speaks to the oppression of the Israelites, to the violent events in Judges, to the divided monarchies in Kings. We are a people who sin against each other and we continue to do so. Yet the knowledge of this fact, this truth, and this reality in the way we treat each other –i.e. the way we argue, the way accuse each other, the way we hurt each other’s feelings - is precisely the reason why this morning’s lectionary text is challenging yet simple, confrontational yet freeing, undeniably offensive yet utterly compassionate.

Verse 15 says, 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.'

Most of us can understand why this text is definitely challenging and undeniably offensive, especially if you are the kind of person that tends to avoid confrontation and believe that "Silence keeps peace". For some cases, walking away is the right choice. Regardless, the text leans towards the "fight" option. It sounds like Jesus is asking us to go and confront the person, tell them exactly what they did wrong, and then on top of the risk of watching one confrontation escalate into another confrontation and into another, we are to go and do this *ALONE*. *How scary!* What's more, if the first attempt does not work out, we are to bring more people into the situation. If that also fails, we are to ask the church to convince, and almost corner the offender to apologize or change their sinful behavior. Finally, if they still refuse to listen, they are considered as outsiders to the community. The church calls this excommunication, which is considered a form of church discipline. It's happened before and it sounds heartless to me!

To my relief, after exploring the commentaries, re-reading the text, I discovered that there is more to this text than meets the eye. What Jesus asks us to do can also be simple, freeing and compassionate. Just like we can't solve a puzzle until we placed all the pieces together to see the larger picture, I think it's important to note that this morning's lectionary reading is a piece of the fourth of five discourses in the Gospel of Matthew. In other words, Matthew's narrative is broken down into 5 main sections. And this one in particular is part of the fourth section. Biblical scholars often give us this kind of outline with each book of the bible to give us a sense of how the various authors might have organized these ancient writings, namely scripture. Sometimes they help. Sometimes they don't. This morning, however, knowing how Matthew's narrative is structured is important, because I want us to consider that Jesus' instruction on dealing with conflict is actually part of a larger narrative for a larger purpose. If we don't, I'm afraid we might limit the full meaning of the passage, possibly miss the point and more importantly, misuse it.

If this passage is read alone, pulled out of its chapter, church and community leaders can easily misuse and even abuse this passage to dominate and control their home, their workplace and their personal agendas within the congregation. With so many online scams, corruptions, people looking out for their own individual and corporate interests, this kind of direct “fight-like” confrontation only feeds into the already increasing distrust, doubt, and suspicion this generation has with authoritative institutions. It just looks like the church is meddling intrusively in business that is not their own. Like, how dare the church demand that I, an American, with the freedom of speech conform to their ways? Additionally, throughout history, we’ve witnessed the dangerous implications of similar text like this when they are used to conquer other nations, convert other religions and dominate other cultures that were considered sinful, barbaric, and impure. Nevertheless, this text is important and is significant for nurturing a healthy Christian community. Because of this, we will examine this text with the rest of chapter 18. Together, I believe God gives an alternative answer to what it means to live together as Christians in a world where there are many divisive factions and broken relationships.

Matthew 18:15-20 is sandwiched in between, or bookended by two well known and frequently read parables. The first being the Parable of the Lost Sheep, which introduces the discourse and the second, being the parable of the Unforgiving Servant, which concludes it. First, I will briefly explain what these two parables say and then I will share how both of these render a deeper meaning and fuller picture for how we are to deal with conflict and dispute in a Christian community.

To the first bookend: the parable of the lost sheep tells the story of a shepherd who leaves her flock on the mountains to search for the one sheep that gets lost, and then rejoices over finding the one sheep that went astray over the ninety-nine that *never* went astray. Her joy came from rescuing the one in danger over the remaining ninety-nine sheep that were safe at home. It's also worth noting, that Jesus shares this parable following a disciple's question on "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He replies, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." By following this question of who is the greatest with the parable of the lost sheep, God reveals that the

greatest disciple isn't the wealthiest, the most intelligent, and the most powerfully gifted leader, but the greatest is whoever that becomes **humble** like a child, and **follows Christ** when he extends his hand and says, "come home." This parable calls us to follow Christ in humility and servitude, not in pride and with privilege.

Now to the other bookend, which concludes our text: the parable of the unforgiving servant tells the story of a King who released and forgave his slave the enormous debt. The King forgives him after the slave begged for mercy. The slave, however, later angers the King, because he would not release his fellow slave in the same way the King released him from the debt. The lesson is we ought to forgive our brothers and sisters in the same way Christ forgave us.

Bookended by these two parables and following the question of who is the greatest disciple, v 15-20 can look something more like this: whenever we notice another member wrestling with his faith, loses sight of who Christ is in her life, blames you or another, stirs up conflict, seeks to damage community, we should confront the offender like a child with humility and

gentleness. Yet like the Shepherd in pursuit of the one lost sheep, we also should do all that we can, even if it means to leave everything we consider safe and comfortable, to GO – go and reach out, go and extend your hand to the church member in conflict with us, go and ask, “How can I help you?” and then stop to *listen*. If the first attempt does not work, we should try again, because we should confront conflict in the same way Christ confronted us when we were in conflict with God. Like the parable of the unforgiving servant, let’s not forget that we were also at some point in the same position as the offender.

Let us remember that when we were once lost, Christ was sent to pursue and carry us home. Knowing and having experienced God’s abundant grace in our life, we ought to with joy and thanksgiving for our own restoration, try again if the first attempt does not work and to keep trying until the one who is lost knows they are loved and forgiven by the whole Christian community. Because God is unwilling to lose even one disciple, Christ calls us to patiently listen, to bear one another’s pain, to diligently search the misdirected and to help each other overcome whatever it is that keeps us from building an authentic relationship with God.

By reaching out in this way, the confrontation becomes less about meddling intrusively in business that is not one's own and more about our responsibility to care for another brother and sister in Christ. It becomes more about Christ's unwillingness to lose even the one disciple from a flock of 99 followers. It becomes more about restoration than punishment, about restorative justice than retribution, and more importantly about God's relentless pursuit for the light of the Gospel to break into the darkness, close isolation of the sinner's heart and shepherd each of us into a life together with God. As Matthew 18:20 reads "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." It is in community, not when we are alone, that we grasp the reality of Christ's presence.

I want to close with a poem, written by a seventeen-year old girl from Singapore. "The poem is titled, "I believe" and you can follow along with me as I read it aloud. It's printed in the worship notes of the bulletin.

I Believe

I believe that there's

Still hope to live,

– not merely to exist.

Somewhere in this

Hopeless whirlpool of life

– a hand extended to help.

In these battered days,

You will find, if you search,

– one who has offered to mend.

I know that somewhere,

In this canyon of despair,

– there's a place of relief.

Somewhere, in this

Turmoil of confusion,

– a right path to follow

Within this world

Of make-believe,

– a faithful friend awaits you.

In this polluted time,

We lead

– a hope to be made clean.

~ Lai Leng Woon , a seventeen-year-old girl from Singapore

I find from it truth to what Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and pastor

says in his book, Life Together, "Those who confess their sins in the

presence of another Christian know that they are no longer alone with

themselves; they experience the presence of God in the reality of the other.”

In light of this girl’s hope to live in these battered days simply because she knows a friend awaits for her, I encourage us to go, and leave our comfort zones, to go and reach out to a struggling neighbor whose fallen from grace, to go and forgive each other again and again, to go and extend a hand to help one another, especially because you know Christ awaits for you with his hand extended to help.