

Jesus the Mediator

Matthew 18: 15-20

“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, 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 that person 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.”

When Joy and I were married we had a videographer capture personalized messages or “advice” for us to revisit someday. There were tender words from grandparents and some playful words from friends. Then Joy’s father spoke. He said, “Whenever the two of you have an argument, keep holding hands.” It is interesting advice. After all, it’s hard to stay connected when issues arise and disagreements happen...even with those whom we are most connected to! But the truth is, that any relationship—whether it be a partner, or a family member, or a neighbor—is going to have its issues. The question isn’t whether there is going to be conflict, but how we are going to deal with it. It’s the subject Jesus addresses in today’s text, but do we really hear what he is saying to the church?

Begin by pondering the question: how do we deal with conflict? It’s not an easy question, but an important one. It’s one every couple’s counselor asks. What is our default reaction when the tension shows up? Do we engage with tempers flaring—our fight response? Or do we get quiet and withdraw—our flight response? Or do we feel paralyzed as both our body and brains seem to freeze? Maybe we gain insight by thinking back to our family systems. Some of us grew up in households where voices escalated—feelings of anger were on display, and people would get it out of their system. Other families might have had conflicts, but they were never talked about it, so we internalized and learned to stuff down the problems. We might even ask the same question of churches. Every pastor as they interview a church is coached to ask the question: “How does the church deal with conflict?” Do we go to the person? Do we air our complaints to the leaders? Do we talk amongst ourselves and form alliances? Do we post on Facebook or Twitter? The question is important because where two or more are gathered conflict happens.

So Jesus offers a three step solution for conflict resolution. Step one: go directly to the person who hurt you—no triangles. Now, I don’t know about you, but right away that is a big ask, isn’t it? To step into the vulnerable place of showing our wounds to our offender one-on-one is counterintuitive. As parents when one of the kids comes running to us about how their sibling hurt them we try to say, “Did you tell them how that made you feel?” Of course, they haven’t! It’s not easy. We adults aren’t much better. It takes trust, which as someone once said, “is one marble in and ten marbles out.” So if the conflict continues after going directly to the person then

there is step two: go find some neutral people who can investigate and hear both sides of the story. If that doesn't work, then the issue goes before the whole church.

Now I don't know about you but yikes! Jesus' "steps" make me a bit squirmy. Step one feels unsafe. Step two seems like we are forming a team against someone. And step three sounds like an intervention which who has ever been to one that has ended well!? I mean, I wish Jesus named a three-step solution for how to deal with a toxic person whose toxic theology excludes and harms so many.

But here's the important piece which often gets missed: the text *is* about how to restore someone within the community who has hurt us. And just in case we don't already know: being gay, or trans, or a drag performer isn't hurting anybody, so it doesn't apply. But it DOES apply to those who have excluded and judged and spread toxins in the name of Jesus.

You see, just before Jesus gives us this outline, he talks about a shepherd who loses one sheep and so leaves the ninety-nine behind to reconcile the one who has gone astray. We tend to think of the lost sheep as someone who has wandered off faith's path, or is struggling with a personal issue. *But the lost sheep Jesus is talking about is the offender!* They are the lost one who the church is to try and bring back into the flock. "Is it not the will of God that one of these should be lost?" Jesus says. Next verse: "So if someone sins against you, go to them alone..." and we are into this text. The point of the text is how to restore someone back into the fold after they have hurt us. The text is about Jesus promising to be present in reconciliation because that is who God is and what God desires. Leave it to humanity to take something Jesus meant as a way toward reconciliation and turn it into a text for judgement and exclusion!

Well, so let's check in: how does it feel? It takes an extraordinary amount of spiritual power and vulnerability to practice this. And we don't always have it. Not only that, but it assumes two things: one, that the church is always going to stand alongside the victim, not the offender. Which doesn't always happen. And two, the work of the church is always about the work of reconciliation and forgiveness. Which also doesn't always happen. Yesterday at presbytery another church was released formally from our denomination due to "irreconcilable differences in theological understanding." Of course, we know it doesn't always happen—maybe it rarely happens anymore.

So when all else fails, Jesus says we are to treat them as a Gentile or as a tax collector. Which is an ironic thing to say since Jesus just got done feeding and healing a bunch of Gentiles, and since this is a gospel ascribed to Matthew who was a tax collector. So how does Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? As insiders! As still having some form of connection. So even when all hope is lost, it doesn't change how we operate. It feels very vulnerable. But I suppose at the end of the day that is really what love is: vulnerable.

God's desire is for us to be reconciled to each other. And when we seek reconciliation, Christ himself is present. And I think it is safe enough to say that if it weren't for God's reconciling love, most of us would have given up on each other and maybe even the church a long time ago.

But here we are. Through times of joy or disagreement. Whether we meet our budget goals or we don't. For better or for worse, we are here. Which means Christ is here too. Reconciling all things. Promising that nothing is lost even when it feels that way. And at the end of the day if we are going to put our trust into anything...let's try and put our trust into that.