

Conflict, Jesus Style  
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15:04

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Matthew 18:15-20

I did not choose this Gospel reading to preach on today.

I would have chosen it, sometime this fall probably. But only after we had gotten to know each other a little better. It feels a bit like going on a first date and asking, "So, where are we getting married?" Too much, too soon!

But God works in ways that are not our ways. And this text was the text of the day in the Christian calendar of readings. So, trusting God, I said ok: I will preach about conflict.

Perhaps it is good that we get right down to business. The work in the interim time is different than during a settled pastorate. My role is to help guide you through five tasks which you will hear me talk about over and over. They are:

- reflecting on your history,
- discerning who you are today,
- encouraging new leadership,
- connecting more with our denomination the United Church of Christ,
- and, finally, welcoming a new pastor.

Oh, if we could only skip to the end and get that new pastor here next week! But the process of change and transformation only happens as we move through the steps. A caterpillar doesn't become a butterfly overnight. And a church does not become ready to welcome a new settled pastor without moving through the steps of transformation either.

So, what do we hear from God this morning in the words Jesus speaks to the disciples? And how does it in turn speak to us as Pilgrim Church?

Today's passage comes right in the middle of a long speech where Jesus is talking directly to the disciples. The speech starts when two disciples come up to Jesus and ask him to tell them which one of the disciples is the greatest.

Clearly they have been arguing. They want to know who is more important, and whose decisions count more, and which one Jesus thinks is the best, and who will be in charge. In some ways it sounds a bit like children arguing over which kid mom loves best. In other ways the argument and the feelings underneath it are all too familiar to us as we wrestle with our own desires for love or power or control in our homes, our lives, and our church.

So, Jesus, what do we do when there is conflict between us?

Rarely in the Bible do we get a blueprint for Christian practice that is so clear.

Jesus tells us if someone sins against you (real or imagined) our first step is to talk to them directly. Face to face. Privately.

Yes, this is hard. Yes, it asks us to bring our best, most mature selves to the table. Yes, it is hard to choose this path when we are angry or frustrated or feel betrayed.

But Jesus is very clear. First--first, before anything else--go and talk privately with that person. As a fellow member of the body of Christ. As a neighbor we love as we love ourselves. And try to resolve your differences.

In a previous church, I began my pastorate in the midst of the aftermath of a huge conflict in the church and a forced resignation of the pastor. One member of the church, a retired clergyperson who had moved to town a few years before, I'll call him Bob, had tried to mediate in the situation. Feelings were running very high with some members furious that he was involved.

As it happens, right after I arrived, the church hosted a UCC Association meeting. Bob was supposed to preside, but folks were so angry at him and at each other, that I ended up choosing another pastor to preside in the meeting. And I didn't talk it over with Bob.

I knew Bob was angry. I watched him stomp out of the meeting without saying a word.

And I did nothing. Years passed, and I mean years. I would see Bob at meetings and I would greet him with a stone of guilt in my stomach.

A decade later, when I had decided to move back to the East Coast and was saying goodbye to all my colleagues, with trepidation, I asked Bob to go to lunch. Finally, after ten years, I confessed that I felt I had acted badly--that I had sinned against him--and asked for his forgiveness.

He paused for a long moment and then spoke of his hurt, his anger and his disappointment over what had happened so long ago. In turn I spoke of my uncertainty that day as a new pastor, and my worries about the congregation. After another long moment Bob looked me in the eye and said, "I forgive you." Finally the decade long breach was healed. Not forgotten, but understood. I finally let go of the breath I had been holding for such a long long time. I imagine he did, too.

The hard part about being human is that we hurt each other. We have conflict. Conflict is part of being human. Conflict is part of belonging to a community. Conflict is part of trying to discern together which way God is leading us. We think differently. We have different ideas. We want different things and we hurt each other with our words, our silences, our actions and our absence of action.

Sometimes we imagine that the church is an idealized place where people should all get along--the peaceable kingdom. But the reality is that every week we pray the Lord's Prayer asking that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We ask God to forgive us our debts, our sins, our trespasses, as we forgive others. We don't reside in heaven. We are firmly planted on the earth working toward the kingdom of God right here, right now. And that means conflict and change and compromise and listening.

We MOST demonstrate our Christianity not by an absence of conflict, but by how we deal with it. And how do we deal with conflict?

Rick Morley, an Episcopalian priest, wrote this tongue in cheek take on Jesus' words:

"If another member of the church sins against you...just talk about them behind their back in the parking lot.

“If another member of the church sins against you...just call a bunch of people in the church to complain about them. You may even want to start a letter-writing campaign against them.

“If another member of the church sins against you...just send them a nasty email. Copy the clergy. And, while you're at it, CC the [Associate Conference Minister].

“If another member of the church sins against you...don't say anything. Just avoid them. Un-friend them on Facebook. And, if you can't avoid them on Sundays, then just leave the church.”

Ouch. This isn't really very funny. Ultimately, it is not supposed to be because these are behaviors that we know and sometimes participate in. We know the pain of living like this. But it does not have to be this way. Indeed, Jesus calls us to live out a different way of dealing with conflict, and gives us the steps to do it.

One of my tasks as your interim is to help you, faithful Pilgrim people, and some of you hurting Pilgrim people, by holding up a mirror. Look at what has divided you. Look at where you hurt and have hurt each other. And then to help bring you back together. For God has important work for you to do. God has wonderful things to bring about here. God needs you to be engaged in the work of the church in this place and time.

So, how to move forward:

First, Jesus tells us, go directly to those who have hurt you and talk to them. Communicate with them. Privately. Not through social media. Not through forwarded email chains. Not in a crowded room. Not after you have complained to all your church friends. But privately, person to person.

Second, if that doesn't work, take someone with you. Why? Jesus says, “So there are witnesses.”

Now, if we are feeling wronged, and pretty hot about it, we might think, “heck yeah, I need a witness! I'll show them who is right!” But witnesses are there not to back up your case but to help both parties find resolution. To help both parties actually hear what is being said, rather than what we assume is being said. To help us soften our hearts with empathy. To offer solutions or help or prayer. Not to take sides, but to be a Christian witness. And, to be honest, to help us be brave enough to follow through.

Third, if that doesn't work, tell it to the church. But why?

Many of our UCC churches go through the Open and Affirming process and wrestle with whether to welcome LGBTQ folks. You moved through that process here at Pilgrim. By design it is a long process including time for education, questions and reflection. It can be very divisive. Differing groups of people come together in the congregation talking about their fears and prejudices and anger that this is happening in their church.

Often at this point people living with LGBTQ sons and daughters offer up their stories of stigma and shame and hurt and how much they love their gay children. They witness to the church as a whole as the church wrestles with how to follow God's call in the midst of conflicting ideas of church.

The third step is to bring the conflict to the church as a whole. Not as a punitive time, but as a time of corporate discernment.

Finally, if this does not work, let the person be to you like a tax collector or Gentile. “Ok, now we are getting somewhere, Jesus. If I can’t get the person to change, I can ignore them and treat them like I don’t know them.”

Except that is not what Jesus is saying. Not at all.

Our passage from the Bible today is from the gospel of Matthew. Who was Matthew but a tax collector, called and beloved of Jesus, a disciple. Jesus was constantly reaching out to Gentiles and tax collectors. Jesus was constantly expanding the circle, accepting the wounded and the sinful, reaching out to anyone who truly in their heart wanted to be a part of the covenantal community of the church.

And so, yes, people can be to us like the tax collectors and Gentiles. But that does not mean we can talk badly about them, or gossip about them, or rejoice in their departure. For they are still part of the body of Christ. They are still ones we must as Christians treat with respect and love, even if they are no longer in our midst. Jesus asks us to have open doors toward those who want to return and live by the covenant of honest, faithful dialogue.

From my short time among you I know there are conversations that need to be had, one on one, in private, in search of honest, and yes, painful reconciliation. And there are conversations that need to be had together as a church body about conflict and forgiveness and healing.

It isn’t easy. It doesn’t come cheap. But it is part of being a community of faith as we move forward toward a new future, a future of hope and health, a bright future of community and reconciliation. A future with Jesus walking with us and helping us build the kingdom of God right here in this place. I look forward to doing that work with you and in seeing what God has in store. Amen