

Message for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A (9/6/2020)
Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus doesn't wear rose-colored glasses. He's clear-eyed about human nature, so he knows that the community of his followers, like all communities, will experience conflict. It's not a question of whether or not we'll hurt each other, but how we address the hurts when they inevitably happen, and how we go about healing them. Hence Jesus' famous three-step guide to reproof and reconciliation in our Gospel from Matthew today. When church folks allude to "Matthew 18" in the context of conflict, it's a reference to these six verses. Drawing on material from Deuteronomy, and paralleling similar processes in other cultures, these guidelines delineate a practical approach to conflict resolution.

Step 1: If you've been hurt by a fellow member, go directly to that person and say so. For as simple as this seems, it may be the hardest step of all. How often do we get up the courage to tell a person that something they've said or done is harmful, and ask them to make amends? Aren't we more inclined to hold quiet grudges, or gossip, or allow resentment to fester until it comes out sideways? But, Jesus insists on direct confrontation.¹

Step 2: If the offender will not listen, go a second time, but take one or two witnesses along. Other trustworthy members will not only be able to attest to what happens during the follow-up conversation, but their presence will also

¹ Michael J. Chan, "Opening the Door to Reconciliation," www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5453.

underline the gravity of the situation. If two or three of my kindred come to me with a grievance, I'm more likely to take it seriously.

Step 3: If the offender still won't listen, bring the matter to the church, and collectively discern the terms of reconciliation, or, in the event that the offender refuses to repent, dismiss them. Fractured relationships are finally a concern for the whole community. Unresolved conflict is bound to wound the body of Christ as trust erodes and bitterness sets in. So, **the church needs to insist on accountability, not only for accountability's sake, but ultimately for the sake of repentance and forgiveness.**

There's ample wisdom in these guidelines, and it behooves us to take them seriously. But, I have to ask: Does the three-step process actually work? It's beautiful in theory, but how does it play out in practice?

I wonder if we're liable to interpret this teaching too simplistically. We may assume, for instance, that there's a consensus as to what qualifies as an offense worthy of reproof. *"If another member of the church sins against you..."* Jesus says. But, members don't easily accept responsibility for harm they don't believe they've caused. Sin, in other words, is often in the eye of the beholder, and it's harder to see the log in my own eye than the speck in my neighbor's.²

We may also take for granted that accountability and reconciliation are the church's highest priorities. *"Go and point out the fault.... [And] if the member listens to you, you have regained that one."* But, accountability and reconciliation

² Matthew 7:3.

may, in fact, fall victim to other concerns – an aversion to ruffling feathers, for example, or a preoccupation with protecting someone’s reputation, or institutional self-preservation. If the difficult work of mending relationships threatens any of these, then it’s less likely to happen.

Finally, we may imagine that all the members of the body are on equal footing, equally empowered to call on each other to repent of sins and make amends. *“If the offender refuses to listen... let that one be to you as an [outsider].”* But, members do not exercise the same power in this regard. Some are able to shield themselves from accountability, even if their offenses are more serious, while others struggle to have their grievances taken seriously.

I’m reminded, for instance, of the clergy sex-abuse scandal, and the staggering complicity of the church institution and its apologists. *Spotlight*, the 2015 Academy Award winner for Best Picture, portrays the team of investigative journalists at *The Boston Globe* who, beginning in 2001, uncovered the extensiveness of the scandal in their city. It wasn’t just a few bad apples, they discovered, but a system designed to shelter offending priests while silencing survivors. Church administrators, attorneys, even average churchgoers preferred to keep widespread clergy misconduct under wraps rather than confront it and take responsibility for it. After all, the people of Boston loved their church, and they didn’t want to undermine its legitimacy.

But, imagine if the church had taken Jesus’ three-step process seriously. Imagine if survivors had a voice from the beginning (step 1); imagine if they

had influential allies to stand at their side (step 2); imagine if the whole church had been willing to face the reality of this especially devastating sin, insist on repentance and reparation, and take action to remove those who presented an ongoing threat (step 3).

In light of this case, I wonder if Jesus' purpose in this passage becomes clearer. **Maybe the three-step process for addressing sin and seeking reconciliation is intended in part as recourse for those who might not otherwise have it. Maybe it's a vehicle to enable disempowered people "to speak so that others might hear."**³ After all, Jesus repeatedly expresses concern for the interests of the "little ones" in chapter 18, so that context is in view in today's verses. Even as his teaching aims to assure accountability within the community, it also safeguards "those who are most vulnerable or at risk."⁴

Friends, the church's communion, and indeed, the integrity of our relationship to the wider community, rests on a commitment to accountability. "The seed of unity," writes one interpreter, "is planted in the soil of confession and forgiveness."⁵ There is no shame in honest repentance; on the contrary, it's our pathway to a more gracious future. Christ promises to be present with us even where two or three are gathered to admit our faults, acknowledge the consequences, and take the necessary steps toward healing.

³ Audrey West, www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4558.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Chan.