

Pentecost 14A (9/10/17)

Ezekiel 33:7-11

Psalm 119:33-40

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

Conflict and hurt are inevitable. In the Christian community, as in every community, our sinful self-involvement draws us away from each other into bitter isolation. But the living Christ holds us together even in spite of ourselves, inviting us into the hard work of healthy confrontation, repentance, and reconciliation. And, by restoring life-giving relationships in the church by his love, he enables us to bear that same love to the world.

Things Jesus does *not* say in Matthew 18:

“If another member of the church sins against you, withdraw quietly yet in disgust, go home in a huff, and stew about it for a few months.”

“If another member of the church sins against you, silently hold it against the ministries they love, and decline to support any of them for a year or two.”

“If another member of the church sins against you, grumble about it to your friends, or better yet, to the pastor (but don’t mention the name of the offending person), or better yet, to your various online communities.”

“If another member of the church sins against you, bottle up your feelings until they come spilling out sideways on a future occasion, preferably at a congregational meeting or at coffee hour on Easter.”

“If another member of the church sins against you, cut your participation in half, and after a while, leave the congregation permanently without telling anyone. Then, either look for a new church, or just stop going to church altogether.”

What Jesus *does* say in Matthew 18:

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.

Jesus is a realist. He entertains no illusions that his followers will seamlessly incorporate his transformative love into our relationships, but instead presumes that the church will experience conflict and hurt. It's really not a matter of *if* another member of the church will sin against you, but *when*. **Discord is the way of human community from the beginning, and the church is no exception. So, Jesus gives detailed instructions for dealing with the fallout.**

The teaching in our Gospel from Matthew is often consulted as a step-by-step guide for addressing specific offenses. In the words of one interpreter: "Here we see developing the earliest legal procedures for excommunication, procedures designed to protect both the individual and the community."¹ In other words, these are pragmatic rules, and Jesus expects the church to follow them.

But, there is something to this teaching that transcends its practical application. There is a theological element to it as well, speaking to the way members of the church engage with each other in general. **This isn't just about adhering to the approved procedure for addressing sins; it's also about recognizing the presence of Christ with us in every aspect of our life together:**

¹ Paul S. Minear, as cited in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, 379.

“For where two or three are gathered in my name,” he promises, “I am there among them.”

The unhappy truth is that conflict and hurt are inevitable. What’s more, we don’t often deal with conflict and hurt in especially healthy ways. In the Christian community, as in every community, our sinful self-involvement draws us away from each other into bitter isolation. We are afraid of rocking the boat, so we keep our resentments to ourselves, judging each other according to our faults and clinging to grudges. We are more likely to wash our hands of each other than we are to address our hurts head on.

But, avoidance and withdrawal are not the way of Christ. Instead, he calls us into the messy work of mending torn relationships with the assurance of his enduring accompaniment, even “where two or three are gathered.”

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber doesn’t mince words when she speaks to new members at House for All Sinners and Saints, her thriving mission start in Denver:

I am always the last to speak at [“Welcome to HFASS”] events. I tell them that I love hearing [all the things they love about the congregation] and that I, too, love being in a spiritual community where I don’t have to add to or take away from my own story to be accepted. But I have learned something [that I want them to hear]: This community will disappoint them. It’s a matter of when, not if. We will let them down or I’ll say something stupid and hurt their feelings. I then invite them on this side of their inevitable disappointment to decide if they’ll stick around after it happens. If they choose to leave when we don’t meet their expectations, they won’t get to see how the grace of God can come in and fill the holes left by our community’s failure, and that’s just too beautiful and too real to miss.

Welcome to House for All Sinners and Saints. We will disappoint you.²

² Pastrix, 54-5.

“The grace of God can come in and fill the holes left by our community’s failure.” That’s what Jesus means when he promises to be present among us, even where only a few of us are gathered to speak the truth in love, swallow our pride, and make an effort to restore our relationships. **Our natural instincts pull us apart, but the living Christ holds us together even in spite of ourselves, inviting us into the hard work of healthy confrontation, repentance, and reconciliation.**

Dear church, the many varying passions, priorities, and personalities in this congregation are bound to bump up against each other, and it’s only a matter of time until you get bruised. What makes the difference in our conflict and hurt is that “Jesus is in the midst of everything we do as a community of faith.”³ When we work up the nerve to name the ways we’ve been injured, **Jesus redefines the rules of engagement in order that we might not write each other off, but rather “regain” each other as beloved kindred in Christ. And, by restoring life-giving relationships in the church by his love, he enables us to bear that same love to the world.**

Welcome to Peace Lutheran Church. We will disappoint you. Will you stick around when we do? Will you continue to choose the hard work of fellowship?⁴ If you do, you’ll see how the love of Christ can overcome our divisions and our pride, sustain our life together, and make us instruments of his peace.

³ Karoline Lewis, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4961>.

⁴ See Dale P. Andrews, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 49.