

Matthew 18:15-20    Bill Uetrict    9.7.23    15 Pentecost

I am the youngest of four children, having three older sisters when I was growing up. (Yes, you can feel sorry for me!) Like many families, ours, when all of my siblings were young, had some conflict, quite a lot, it felt to me. My two youngest sisters, from my memory, seemed to battle frequently. Patty, *the* youngest sister, born with a serious congenital heart condition, was a challenge to my parents. She and my mom argued a lot, as did my mom and dad. I never liked all the arguing. I remember on a couple of occasions getting on to the intercom system that we had in our house and saying loudly and clearly, “stop.” Stop the arguing.

I never liked conflict. And in many ways, I still don’t, although I have worked hard to change my attitude toward it. When I was nominated to be bishop of our synod, I remember thinking to myself and sharing with a few others that I wasn’t sure I would be a good bishop, since conflict is not my gig and conflict is what a lot of churches face. Generally, I have thought of conflict as a bad thing. It’s best, I have believed, to avoid it, which is why so many times in my life I have been a people pleaser.

I wonder, though, if I and we don’t need a different view of conflict. I don’t know. Maybe conflict isn’t the enemy that we think it is. I surmise that the early church’s teaching on conflict and its management, a teaching that we experience in Matthew today, suggests that the early church *assumed* the reality of conflict and encouraged an active dealing with it.

Sarah Dylan describes the church as a “school for souls.” It’s where we can learn to deal with real life and real people. Dylan, as she highlights the significance of “being in this together,” the importance of being the Body of Christ, says that “the Body of Christ includes an awful lot of people who are every bit as difficult as we are!” No wonder we

might have some conflict! No wonder we sometimes find it hard to love some folks. The Body of Christ is composed of broken people, sinners. Your friends who say they want to avoid the church because the church is nothing but a bunch of hypocrites are absolutely right in their judgment. We're a bunch of hypocrites--just like them. The church is a school for hypocrites. It's where we learn to deal with our hypocrisy. It's where we learn how hard it is to love. It is where we can learn how to deal with conflict.

Matthew has a relatively high view of the church. In fact, his gospel is the only one that uses the word "church" (ekklesia). Obviously, Matthew is dealing with a religious community that is getting more organized and is struggling with the issues that occur when people come together in community. We see Matthew's high view of the church in today's reading in which Jesus says: "If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you;" and, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." The Jewish-Christian audience receiving Matthew would recognize this teaching, for Jews often taught that whenever a few Hebrews gathered to discuss the Torah (the law, the scriptures), the divine presence (they called it the "shekinah" presence) was there.

This is a big view of the Christian community. These days it's popular to downplay the community, to highlight our faults (we are judgmental), to claim that it's possible to be religious without being a part of a church or other body of believers. I understand all of that, and I concur with some of those thoughts to some degree. But the very nature of the message of Jesus is communal. What the message of Jesus does is reconcile people, break down the barriers that divide people, connect people, gather people. The gathering of the community, Jesus in Matthew tells us, is an experience of the very

presence of God, the most important thing that lies beneath and shines through all that is.

Can you experience God on the golf course? Without a doubt. I experience God on the bike trail all the time. But unless I ride with somebody, the only person I have to deal with on the bike trail is me. And if I do ride with another person, I am dealing with someone who has the same obsession that I do. I am not having to deal with people who don't like bikes, who think that bike riding is some kind of conspiracy aimed at car manufacturers. And if I ride with someone who has the same skills that I do, I don't have to deal with having to reduce my speed or pay attention to them when they get behind me. I don't have to struggle with my natural tendency to be self-preoccupied.

Maybe the experience of the shekinah divine presence that happens when two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus is indeed a school for souls, a school that forces us to deal with our egocentricity, our narcissism, our self-centeredness. I've always felt that one of the great reasons to have family meals is that they force us to deal with the fact that we don't always get everything we want, that life isn't built around our tastes. When you eat a family meal, you may not be able to take six helpings of those pork chops, because there are other people there. And you may have to be ready to deal with the fact that coconut-covered beets were part of the menu.

Perhaps the church is a school for souls, a school meant to help us deal with our self-centeredness. The church matters. Gathering with the church matters. It's a big deal. And if it is such a big deal, then it matters how we care for it, which is what I think Jesus in Matthew is telling us today when he maps out a procedure for dealing with sin and conflict.

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Note that this person has sinned against you. You in some ways are the victim. But you are the

bigger person. You seek the other person out. You have reason to have something against them, to be in conflict with them. But you want to be reconciled. So, you don't run from the conflict. You confront it. But you do so in a one-on-one way. You don't "triangulate." When your problem is with Bob, you talk with Bob, not with Jessica, who starts wondering with you, "What about Bob?" You go directly to Bob on his turf. It's a way for Bob to save face. The issue isn't really who is right or who is the guiltier one. The issue is reconciliation. After all, the church is a school to learn reconciliation.

If it doesn't work to go to Bob directly, you bring along a couple of other people to make sure that what is being said is helpful and truthful. Those of you who have been involved in interventions with loved ones who have addictions or mental illnesses may recognize this step. And if bringing a couple of people along doesn't cause reconciliation, then you tell the whole church and then, if that doesn't work, you treat the offender as a "Gentile and a tax collector." I have to wonder if that line isn't a bit tongue in cheek because, according to the gospels, Matthew is a tax collector and Gentiles are often at the center of the gospel. Note the wise men who visit Jesus after he is born, the Canaanite woman who won't let Jesus not heal her daughter, and the nations who are to be the recipients of the church's message. I get this sense that we are called not to write anybody off ever. Reconciliation is always at the center of what we are about.

Now I realize that this process doesn't always work. I realize that you can be a prophet as Ezekiel was called to be and speak the truth to people, and they don't want to hear it or act on it. Sometimes their shame and the judgment that they bring on themselves will cause them to become further entrenched in their sin and their conflict. Not being reconciled just justifies them. But still, the call for us is clear: the call to care for the community that is our gift, the call to seek reconciliation.

I don't like conflict; I never have. But maybe conflict, the conflict that comes when people come and are together isn't the great enemy. Sarah Dylan suggests the conflict can even be sacramental, a means to experience God. Yes, you might say; I must need a little less sacrament then. And I'll admit that I prefer to live in an environment like this one where this is little conflict. But if the gospel is primarily about God reconciling all things and all of us to himself, then maybe what can come out of conflict (reconciliation) is our participation in the work of God and our modeling to others what the gospel is all about.

Other people don't need to think that we never have conflict. For Bev and me to communicate that would be a lie. Everybody has conflict, especially if the relationship they are involved in is worth anything. But other people are blessed, the world is blessed, when we as couples, as friends, as families, as the church, work through our conflict, discover or are discovered by reconciliation. Reconciliation is our rightful home. It is God's gift to the world. It's God's dream for the world. The church is a school for souls to learn God's gift and dream.