

Sermon for Oct. 8, 2017 – “Life Together”

27th Sunday in OT, Year A – Text: Matthew 18:10-22 (Originally OT23A)

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I was taking a class on the Psalms in seminary and we'd been talking one day about Psalm 133. The first verse tells us “how very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.” After the class, a group of us were having a discussion. It was about the psalm and the notion of unity in churches. What I remember most about that discussion is that we'd all had an experience of conflict in a church. Some they witnessed, some they were directly involved in, but all related just how ugly it was. In some cases, it was resolved amicably, but for most it was not. What really stuck with me was that in almost every case no one could remember exactly what started the conflict in the first place, and this was all at least a year or two before any of us were ordained! I will tell you so much has been written about conflict in churches probably because there's so much conflict in so many churches; the one place, ironically, you'd think conflict would be absent. What's going on here?

I think it starts with the fact that Christians are often taught that, “the world is against us.” We're exhorted to “stand firm against the forces of darkness.” We're ready for, even looking forward to, battling the “forces of evil.” We're seldom ready for friendly fire, if for no other reason than we don't expect it in church. We're Christians after all. Shouldn't we be above the pettiness and lack of civility around us? We're supposed to be nice, aren't we? We're supposed to be kind, especially to one another, right? And didn't we read somewhere that we're supposed to love our neighbor? I can't be sure but I think someone, probably Jesus, commanded us to do so!! But is that really how we are? It usually happens like this, if a member of the church sins against you just talk about them behind their back. The parking lot's always a good place to do that. If a member of the church sins against you just call a bunch of people in the church to complain about them. Better still, start a rumor. You can even write a letter and send it to a bunch of people. And hey, if a member of the church sins against you just send them a nasty e-mail. Copy the pastor. Oh, and while you're at it CC the presbytery. 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, well then, just leave the church. Or you can stay, be miserable, and try to ruin it for everyone else. Does that sound about right?

Believe it or not stuff like that has happened in churches where I've been a member and where I've served! And it's usually about something really unimportant, something really, really dumb! And I don't think I need to tell you, but will anyway, that it's ugly...**very** ugly...and not even close to how Jesus tells us we're to handle ourselves, not even remotely close.

So, we ask, what are we supposed to do? Glad you asked. Because, in our gospel reading, Jesus answers that very question. He talks directly to His disciples about what our fellowship is to be like. The flow of the passage is important as there's movement from the individual to the communal. Where there is sin, Jesus says, confront it **directly**...Face-to-face. Not only does this way of working out difficulties lead to forgiveness, it does so in a graceful way. The offended party isn't dragging the offender through the mud. If it gets worked out here no one else needs to know. Forgiveness is available without fear of embarrassment in the fellowship. It can be done quietly. Lovingly. Gracefully.

If this does not solve the problem include someone else in the conversation. But, and I want to be clear, Jesus isn't instructing us to bring witnesses to testify **against** someone who's sinned against us. He's not giving us permission to gang up on someone but to testify **to the exchange** between the two of you. This is to provide for grace amidst discretion. And if all else fails, as a last resort, take it to the community as a whole. From individual confrontation to communal attention. The movement of the passage is a progression, a progression that follows the development of the conflict from its origins in individual matters to its conclusion at the community level. Why's this so important? Well, because at each point along the way sin has implications for everyone involved; for the **entire** community. What's going on here? What's this all about? Well, for starters, this isn't just about safety **in** numbers but the safety **of** numbers. The health and welfare of the community as a whole are part and parcel of the problem of conflict between any of its individual members at each point along the way. From the start as two individuals are together to the inclusion of witnesses and supporters, to the involvement of the assembly as a whole. There's something else at stake. That "something" is the **real** presence of Christ within the community. Its integrity. The glue that holds it together. Following His teaching on progressively confronting sin Jesus has more to say. He teaches that anyone who refuse to listen to the church is to be treated like "a Gentile and a tax collector."

It's ironic, probably intentionally so, that this line follows the parable of the lost sheep that opened our gospel reading and precedes the response to Peter's question about forgiveness that closed the reading. What Jesus is saying essentially is that being a member of the church means we have a responsibility. If a sheep gets lost we don't look for an hour and call it quits. No, we get out there and we find that sheep! If someone sins against us, even repeatedly, we don't give up on them. We don't just forgive them a few times. We forgive them every single time! That's what Jesus meant by seventy-seven times! And that whole treat those who don't come around as "Gentiles and tax collectors" thing, well we all know how Jesus treated them right? Yep, he hung out with them, ate with them. He even made one of them a disciple; not coincidentally, the one who wrote the gospel we're reading from today, Matthew! How about that!?!?!?

Sadly, churches have been destroyed by backbiting and whisper campaigns. It can be devastating, and not just to membership, finances, programs, and so on, it can be devastating to the **witness** of that church. For when that happens, sadly, churches cease to be a place of forgiveness, grace, and mercy. And when these things no longer exist in the church how can we show them to the world? And if the church doesn't close its doors, it might just as well because it ceases to be a church in any discernible fashion. What's worse, that has a ripple effect throughout the entire Body of Christ, that is, the Church Universal in all times and in all places. Why? Because things like forgiveness, love, etc. are meant to be at the core of who we are. It's what makes us a church and what separates us from other charitable and service organizations. And, let's be honest, if we can't do it between ourselves in the church how can we ever be agents of reconciliation in the world? I'll say this as often as I have to, being a member of the church means we have a **responsibility**. Starting with leadership and trickling on down through to the members of the congregation.

A responsibility to **reconcile**, to work **together**. A responsibility to be able to come together when we disagree to work out ways in which we can agree and continue to work and worship together thereby maintaining the integrity of the community as Christ's Body, because notice what Jesus says about the power of agreement. Jesus says that anything that's agreed upon by two on earth will be done for them by the Father in heaven. This is a promise. But notice that Jesus doesn't stop there. He says, "**where two or three are gathered in my name...I am there among them.**" But, Jesus isn't saying that He's present when we agree...no! He's saying that He's present, **really** present, where two or three are gathered in the His Divine Name. Again, not just where two or three **agree** in Jesus' name, but where two or three are **gathered**. I guess this includes the two who refuse to listen to each other when discussing a matter over which they disagree. Even there, perhaps **especially** there, Christ is present.

I can tell you that a lot of books have been written about church conflict. I've read many of them. They're required reading at seminaries. And, experts who wrote these books all agree on one thing, that conflict in churches can actually be a good thing and may actually be **conducive** to creativity and growth. The truth is conflicts don't kill churches. Refusing to deal with them, refusing to hold people accountable for their actions are what kill churches. One of the things that plague most Christian communities, probably all human communities to one degree or another, is our inability to handle the tougher parts of human existence. We can't handle confrontation, disagreement, or mutual accountability very well. When it comes right down to it we simply don't know how to **live** together, **fight** together, or stay together. We don't like to be held accountable and we're, at best, uncomfortable holding others accountable. We probably need to get over both of these.

In 1939, Bonhoeffer wrote a book entitled "Life Together." In his book, Bonhoeffer wrote: "Nothing could be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to sin. Nothing could be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a sister/brother from the path of sin." Bonhoeffer was right (he often was). We avoid anything that could potentially put us in conflict with one another. We do so for lots of reasons. The one I hear most often is that we're afraid people will leave and for that reason, lots of people have gotten away with bad behavior in churches. Behavior that they would never have gotten away with at work, or any place else for that matter. And, Jesus was never shy about pointing out bad behavior...Just ask the Pharisees and scribes! But Jesus was about more than simply pointing out bad behavior. It seems to me that perhaps more than anything else, Jesus was about showing people a better way of doing things, a better way of living. And as head of the church He is all about offering us a better way of being the church!

I'm reminded of Proverbs 27:17 that reads: "**Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.**" I've a feeling Jesus knew this passage as well. And, brothers and sisters here's the thing, I believe with all my heart that if we care enough about each other, if we've the courage to work together and have the difficult conversations, if we're patient enough to do so using the model Jesus provides, I believe that not only will we be better people for it but the church will be better for it as well. We grow that much closer to becoming the church God calls us to be and the kind of church people want to be a part of because what we find is a greater intimacy. You see, when handled correctly, conflict has a way of **refining** relationships, deepening them, taking them to levels we never thought possible. Conflict is an opportunity to learn to love people more. Conflict is an opportunity to personally grow more, to become spiritually more mature, to become more Christ-like and to experience His real presence, a preview of what the coming kingdom will be like. Not coincidentally, this promised, real presence of God is a central theme of Matthew's gospel. It begins in the very first chapter with the promise of child who would be called Emmanuel, God With Us.

And continues on through to Jesus' parting assurance to us that He is with us always as He ascends to heaven in the final chapter. In the context of this overarching narrative of God's presence this is good news for us who are members of Christ's church. Brothers and sisters, what our gospel reading provides us with is Jesus' clear blue-print for how we're to live with one another. How our communities might be holy places where holy relationships might flourish. We must continue to practice it. We must do so until it's so ingrained in our hearts, minds and souls, in our very DNA, that we can't imagine living any other way. Because, for Jesus, there is no other way.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.