

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Year A, RCL
September 6, 2020
North Fork Ministries
Gospel:
Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus said, "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."

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On the occasion of the death a few years ago of the noted and much-loved comedian Robin Williams, some of you probably came across his well-known top ten reasons to be an Episcopalian. Included on the list are: no snake handling, you can believe in dinosaurs, free wine on Sunday, all of the pageantry – none of the guilt, but the number one reason to be an Episcopalian, Mr. Williams says, is that no matter what you believe, there's bound to be at least one other Episcopalian who agrees with you.

In compiling his list, I don't know if Robin Williams had the gospel passage we just read in mind or not, but it seems to fit. "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."

Episcopalians are, in general, an agreeable lot, and our church is, in particular, is a rather harmonious place, so I don't think that you would have any trouble finding at least one other Episcopalian who agrees with you, no matter how distant a place on the lunatic fringe you may personally occupy. But I'm also pretty certain that it would not be difficult to find, perhaps sitting on a chair six feet away from you, a fellow parishioner who believes something very different about the nature of God and how God works in the world. That's part of the beauty of who we are, we can disagree with one another and still know that when two or three of us are gathered in God's name, it is God's promise to be with us.

But conflict does happen within the church. Apparently there was conflict in the early church, conflict that was often addressed by St. Paul, but in today's gospel reading by the compiler of Matthew's gospel. It's curious to read of this method for dealing with conflict we heard described in Matthew, since the church that was the concern of Matthew didn't exist in Jesus' day.

The instructions from Matthew are pretty straightforward. If someone sins against you, point out the fault. If they don't listen, take a couple of witnesses with you and point out the fault again. And if they still don't listen, bring the matter up in front of the whole church. And if they don't listen to the church, they should be regarded as Gentiles or tax collectors – outsiders. It's hard to imagine the Jesus who practiced and taught compassion and forgiveness actually saying these words, especially since, in the verses that follow, Jesus tells Peter that he is to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven.

Nonetheless, it's not unheard of for some fundamentalist churches, to take the advice literally and to adopt the method. A number of years ago I accidentally stumbled across the process in action. I had scheduled a meeting one Wednesday evening with the pastor of a small, country church nestled in the Piney Woods east of Austin, Texas. When I arrived, a dozen vehicles were parked in the gravel parking lot surrounding the white frame church. Light, filtered through the multi-colored glass windows of the sanctuary, illuminated the parched grounds. I could hear hymn singing above the rattle of an ancient window-mounted air conditioner. I passed through the pamphlet filled vestibule, entered the sanctuary, and took a seat on the back pew. Skipping the third verse, the congregation sang the final chorus of "Just As I Am", and noisily placed their hymnals in their racks. The pastor, stood up and asked, "Is there any other business before we close in prayer."

A middle-aged woman, rose quietly to her feet and said, "Pastor, I have a matter I would like to bring before the congregation." And then she told the story of a young woman named Bernice, who had been attending their church for about six months, and, as she related the story, "wore enough perfume to cause the children nearby to cough and sneeze and break out in a rash. I talked to her about it and told her my daughter was allergic, but she wouldn't listen. Then I took my sister Maxine with me and we talked to her about it, but she keeps on doing it. So I'm doing as the scripture says, 'If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church.' "

In the conversation that followed, it became clear that members of the congregation objected to more than Bernice's perfume. Her marital status was uncertain, her dresses too short, the multi-hued skin of her children put their parentage in doubt, and she was a little too friendly with some of the church's elders. The young pastor blushed and stammered and did his best to carry his congregation through the conflict resolution process that Matthew had, rather unkindly I thought, bequeathed him.

I'm daily thankful that we have we have a harmonious congregation here on the North Fork, and doubly thankful that when we have conflict we don't have to rely solely on Matthew's method.

Even so, there is something to be said for having a process for dealing with conflict. In the contemporary church, when people are offended by someone else, or maybe by the clergy, they typically just leave, not wanting to risk confrontation or conflict, with little

opportunity to resolve differences, grow in relationship, or do the hard work of reconciliation.

I'd like to suggest another conflict resolution method, useful in all kinds of interpersonal relationships. I'm indebted to Byron Katie, for the method she calls, "The Work." Like Matthew's prescription for dealing with conflict, there are also four simple steps.

Beginning with a thought, a judgment, you have about another person, you first ask yourself, "Is it true?"

The second step is to ask yourself, "Can I absolutely know that it's true?"

Third, ask, "How do you react, what happens when you believe that thought?"

And then fourth, "Who would you be without the thought?"

So for example, you have the thought that your husband always leaves his dirty socks scattered around the house. You ask yourself, "Is it true?" And then, "Is it absolutely true that your husband leaves his dirty socks scattered around the house?" It may be true or not.

And then, "What happens when I believe that my husband scatters his dirty socks everywhere." Maybe as a result of the thought, you feel unvalued, not listened to, worthless."

And then, "Who would you be without the thought?" Maybe affirmed, valued, respected?"

And that, Katie says, is what you control – not what someone else does, but how you react to it, and who you are when you let go of those thoughts. It's an approach filled with a desire for understanding and compassion, both for the person with whom you are in conflict and for yourself. As a church, how we deal with the conflicts that inevitably arise will form patterns of congregational behavior that will persist long after we are all gone. And our methods of dealing with conflict, can serve as an example to the world at large. The love and understanding we show toward each other spills over and permeates the entire community. In these divisive times, that is a weighty responsibility.

For almost 2000 years, people in the church have been trying to figure out how to get along, using all kinds of methods. In the end, I think that those parishioners who have succeeded in resolving conflict are those who have remembered, and taken to heart, Jesus' promise that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."