

Matthew 18:15-20
St. Andrew's, Nogales

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

It is comforting that Jesus says these words following a discourse on conflict resolution in the church. We need to know that he is with us in the hard times.

Only twice in the Gospels is the word ‘ecclesia’, or church, used, both are in the Gospel according to Matthew and this passage is one of those two which includes it. It leads some scholars to think that the writer of the gospel added some additional instructions to Jesus’ basic statements about forgiveness, as the early churches began to encounter conflict developing among their members.

The issue at hand is what to do if a brother or sister in the church sins against another. And the focus is on reconciliation rather than punishment. Several steps are recommended. The first step is to go to the brother or sister in private and try to resolve the situation. Perhaps if this is done in a loving way understanding and reconciliation can occur. Notice that the person who is offended is the one who is called on to take the initiative in reconciliation.

However, if that does not work, the recommendation is to take one or two other members, perhaps to speak to the person and push for reconciliation, or to clear up misunderstandings, or just to be observers of who said what. Only if these steps do not work is the matter to be brought before the whole church. If that doesn’t work then the offender will be treated as an outsider, like a Gentile and a tax collector.

Separation from the church body would be hard for many people, who in the early days often had to separate from family when they joined a Christian worshipping community.

But let us note that Jesus associated with sinners, tax collectors and even gentiles. He treated total strangers with compassion. So it is clear that the door is being left open for the offender to be re-evangelized and rejoin the church community.

It is also very clear, from where this passage occurs in the gospel that the goal is to reclaim the person who has sinned, not to punish them. The preceding passage is the well-known parable about finding the lost sheep, and in the following one Peter asks Jesus, "If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus answers, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Churches are not immune from conflict, as we here at St. Andrew's well know. The question is how do we learn as a body to deal with it. We are called to never stop reaching out in love. And we all know that is hard, and it is also countercultural in our society today.

Our Western culture focuses on truth in judicial matters and embraces punishment for offenders. And we often call upon social science and counseling for those who are acting out. Eastern cultures focus more on preserving the honor of the individual. Jesus calls the church, as his body, and here at St. Andrew's, that's us, to a middle way of honoring the person by initiating a reconciliation process, and taking a number of steps before separating the person from the body.

I think we, as a part of the body of Christ, can learn to do this better than we have, and I include myself among those who need to learn to do this better. I invite those of you who are concerned with how we handle conflict to please speak with me or Jean Moehlman, our Senior Warden, or a member of the Vestry, to tell us your perspective and to offer your suggestions. Let us know how you may have been hurt. You may well help us to be more proactive to move to resolve conflict in the early stages, rather than become reactive when it gets harder.

Remember that we are members of a community, Christ's body, not just a collection of individuals who come together on Sunday morning only. And we are called to have compassion for others, including ourselves.

In today's passage from the Apostle Paul's letter to the members of the church in Rome, Paul uses the word love, which means much the same thing as compassion. He writes, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." The commandments of Hebrew tradition are summed up in Jesus' injunction to "Love your neighbor as yourself." And he means not just our distant neighbors, but also our neighbors sitting in the pews.

We need to remember that the Holy Spirit breaks through all the boundaries established by us mortals. And compassion - love - also breaks through the same boundaries.

Many of us may have been introduced to Jesus by being asked to believe things about him or just believe in him, but there is a much deeper meaning to the word believe. In both Greek and Latin the word believe means "to give one's heart to". So to believe in Jesus means giving our deepest selves to him and living as he would live. And that means to have love - compassion - for others.

So as we come together at the table this morning to share in the Eucharist, remember that we not only journey with Jesus as individuals, we journey with Jesus as a community.

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Amen.