

Sermon for Proper 18A  
Sunday, September 10, 2023  
“Called Out to Reconcile”

Text: Matthew 18:15-20

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

For the past three Sundays, including today, our Gospel readings have dealt with the church—that assembly of believers who have been called out to proclaim the good news of the resurrected Christ and offer hope to a broken world. Two weeks ago Peter recognized Jesus as the Messiah, so Jesus gave him the responsibility to establish the church; and Paul’s words that day reminded us that as the church, we are a diverse gathering of people with a variety of gifts that help us share the good news. Last week the words of Jesus compelled us to recognize that a life of following him carries with it great responsibility and sacrifice, but ultimately there is great reward. As his followers, we may do things that the world doesn’t expect or understand, but in the end we will find inner peace and hopefully we will have made this world a better place. Today’s Gospel lesson dredges up a reality of living in community with others: any time humans gather together for good, there will be conflict.

This should come as no surprise that we are prone to conflict; conflict has been a part of the human condition from the very beginning. The Book of Genesis tells us that right after they were created, Adam and Eve participated in of the Fall of Humanity—Original Sin—whether it was their self-discovery as independent beings, or they had sex, or they simply ate an apple, they caused a conflict between them and God. Then one of their sons, Cain, killed his brother Abel out of jealousy. That was just the beginning, and the conflicts go on and on and on. The Bible is a record of numerous conflicts of humans with each other and with God. Conflict is in our DNA.

We humans are social, communal animals; anthropologists attest to this. We thrive as a species when we don’t do things alone, but in the presence of others. We support each other, we protect each other, we teach each other, and we love each other. God gave his human creation the gift of free will; we are intelligent, thinking beings and we have a lot of ideas running through our heads. When we come together in community those wills come together collectively, but my view of the way the world should be is going to differ from someone else’s view, and that in itself is a set up for disagreement and conflict. But that’s not necessarily a bad thing. When we share our ideas and open up the richness of our individual experiences, we can use our unique experiences to make our collective human experience more fruitful and more rewarding. But, at the same time, God gave us free will. Often, that free will causes us to do something that creates a conflict with somebody else. We have the best of intentions; we feel in our hearts that what we’re doing is right, yet we find ourselves stuck in a dispute or disagreement. We encounter conflicts in every aspect of our lives: our personal lives, our family lives, our church life, our social life, on social media, in politics, and all over the world. We hear about wars, rumors of war, and disasters.

You'd think that after so many thousands of years of humans living together we would have figured out how to handle our conflicts, but humans on the whole are lousy at managing conflict. We create conflicts and then make them worse because we fail—and more often *refuse*—to communicate with each other. Paul's advice to the growing church in Rome is that we “lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light...not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy.” The words of Jesus in today's Gospel gives us sound advice as to how we, his followers, can deal with our conflicts.

Biblical scholars interpret today's gospel passage in parallel with Matthew 16:13-20, which was the lectionary reading two weeks ago when Peter declared that Jesus is the Messiah, and the passage is probably the product of the tradition of the Christian community to whom Matthew was writing more than the words of Jesus. These two passages are the only two places in the gospels where the word *ekklesia* is used, and may reflect a developing institutional church more than a real situation in the life of Jesus. It starts out “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” This is the way it has been translated in the NRSV, but the Greek text actually says, “if your brother (or sister) sins against you.” The original text regards the *ekklesia*, the church as an extended family, an extension of biological blood relatives, that binds the faithful in Christ to one another—and you've heard me say time and time again that family relationships are important. The focal point of this passage is not on punishment, but on reconciliation—reconciliation with another member of the community, specifically, but actually reconciliation with anybody. It even repeats what Jesus said to Peter after his messianic declaration: “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” If you don't make peace with your neighbor while on earth, if you don't resolve the conflicts you have here on earth, you won't be at peace in heaven either. If we dwell in our conflicts and leave disagreements and disputes unreconciled in our present reality, then we won't be able to realize the forgiveness and freedom that exist in the kingdom of God. That doesn't mean we can't agree to disagree about something, but it does mean that we ought to talk to each other and come to terms with our conflicts, name them, learn from them, and then try to live in harmony with one another. If only the powers and principalities of the world did that. If only our legislators did that. If only politicians did that! We might not have all the awful conflicts we see going on in our government, among societies and nations, among groups that differ from each other, whether by race, economic status, self-identification, nationality, and so on. If only we talked to each other in our personal lives, in our families, in our workplaces, and in our churches!

No matter who we are or what our station in life is, everyone has to deal with a conflict at some point or another, and the key to diffusing the conflict is good communication. Good communication settles disputes, it may even prevent disputes before they happen. Communicating can break down personal barriers, inspire negotiations between people, political parties, violent factions, and sovereign nations

and reduce the incidence of insurrection and war. Humans of the world would function more harmoniously, if only we communicated with each other. Jesus has given us a game plan for how we should deal with the conflicts in our lives; he has given us a blueprint for building stronger relationships in today's gospel. It doesn't apply simply to church members; it applies to all of our human sisters and brothers as well. Unfortunately, modern technology has made personal communication among us happen less and less by enabling us to communicate remotely, impersonally, and mechanically—we email, text, and tweet (or whatever they call it now), but we don't talk one-on-one and so we don't get to hear and share our feelings with each other or see each other's body language.

We need to return to the basic teachings of Jesus Christ. The lessons we have been taught in these last few weeks are lessons in our identity as Christians: who we are and what we do, so that we can live with each other. We are sisters and brothers who know that Jesus Christ is the Messiah—the savior and redeemer of the world—and we gather together regularly to share our experience of God because that helps us put into perspective how God moves in our lives. The last verse of today's gospel offers a simple, yet powerful message of hope: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them.” We don't need thousands in our midst to proclaim Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Lord. Even when we are small in number, Jesus is with us to bless us, comfort us, and inspire us. And when we come into this space he is always present here fully in body, soul, and divinity in the Blessed Sacrament. We are the church; we are the *ekklesia*—brothers and sisters called out as witnesses as testifiers to go into the world and share our experience of God. When we do that in his name, we bring about a glimpse of the great kingdom of God that is to come. When we show the light of Christ that dwells within us, we help reconcile and transform the world. Amen.

### Resources

*Feasting on the Word* for Proper 18 (Year A, Volume 3)

Eric Barreto, “Commentary on Matthew 18:15-20” in *The Working Preacher*, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2164](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2164).