

Sermon for Proper 18A
Sunday, September 10, 2017
“Called Out to Reconciliation”

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 we heard Jesus charge Peter to establish the church, after he declared that Jesus Christ is the Messiah; and Paul’s words reminded us that the church is a diverse gathering of people who use their gifts to continue Peter’s declaration. 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 dreges up a reality of living in community with others: any time humans band 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. Take Adam and Eve, for starters. We talk about 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, there was a conflict between them and God. And right after that, Cain killed his brother Abel because he was jealous. The conflicts go on and on. Holy Scripture is a record of the conflicts of humankind with itself 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 different 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, we open up the richness of our individual experiences and we can use that to make our collective experience more fruitful and more rewarding. Unfortunately that doesn't always happen and we find ourselves in a rut—we find ourselves stuck in a dispute or disagreement. I won't even try to name all of the conflicts that we have in our lives; you know where they are in your personal lives, in your family lives, in your social life, even in the world. Just turn on the tv or surf the net.

Today's Gospel lesson needs a bit of unpacking. 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 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." Now this is the way the NRSV has translated it, but the Greek text does not say, "member of the church," but rather, "if your brother (or sister) sins against you." The community is 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 a member of the community, specifically, but reconciliation with anybody, really. It even repeats what Jesus said to Peter, "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 come to terms with our conflicts, name them, learn from them, and then try to live in harmony with one another. If only powers and

principalities tried 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.

The lessons we have encountered in these last few weeks are lessons in our identity as Christians: who we are, why we do what we do, and how 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 can 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.