

9-13-2020 SERMON CCI Matthew 18: 10-20 When Conflict Comes

Is this morning's scripture reading anyone's favorite? Wouldn't we rather avoid it? After all, haven't we seen it used to really hurt people? Yet we need this text, because it offers a way to deal with conflict and we live in a time filled with conflict and hurt- in our nation, our families, at work, and even in our churches.

Conflict happens. It happens naturally wherever groups of people live, work, or worship together. Opinions and desires differ. Conflict happens in spite of our best intentions because we all make mistakes, and sometimes we even intentionally hurt one another. During this pandemic with families inside together almost 24/7, relationships that were already shaky are unraveling. In this highly-charged political season, family members and friends are choosing not to talk because differing political and religious views just stir up conflict. And there's conflict in churches. I read an article last week that there may be a flood of pastors resigning because of the immense stress pastors and churches are experiencing during these dramatic changes - our whole way of being the church has been turned upside down, yet expectations remain just as high, new skills are constantly needed, and churches are now arguing over the right time and way to re-open.

I appreciate how Jesus acknowledges the reality of conflict. He didn't just say, "Shame on you, knock it off!" Nor did he ignore the issue. Jesus gave us a path that aims to mend relationships and heal hurt feelings.

Our reading began with Jesus calling some small children to stand near him and told his disciples a parable about a shepherd who left 99 sheep to go search for one sheep who had wandered from the fold. When he found it, the shepherd rejoiced more over that one sheep than all the 99 who never strayed. But what shepherd leaves his sheep unguarded and risks losing them to wolves or thieves to look for one lost sheep he may never find? It doesn't make real life sense. It's tempting to add some details to Jesus' parable to help it sound better. Perhaps the shepherd left his 99 sheep in the care of an experienced hired hand because having the shepherd leave them unguarded is unrealistic. But it is exactly at the unrealistic point in a parable where we learn its most important point about God and the kingdom of God. The experienced shepherd would consider whether the danger of losing the 99 sheep was worth finding the lost one; he'd cut his losses and write off that one sheep. But God... God loves us too much to write us off when we stray. He loves us enough to seek us out, to restore our relationship with him. Jesus says that God isn't willing that any should perish.

Now comes the hard implication of that parable. What about when one Christian has gone astray and sinned against another Christian? How should the person who was wronged respond? Write off the person who wronged them and cut their losses? Or seek to heal the relationship like the parable's shepherd? Jesus gives us 3 steps to respond like that shepherd when dealing with conflict.

Step one is the hardest step. "If your brother or sister sins against you"- our translation left out "against you," but it becomes clear as the story progresses that Jesus was talking about when one Christian harms another, not about a secret sin. So when someone does something wrong against us, Jesus says we are to go to that person in private and try to resolve the problem. Let's face it; we don't like this step. We'd rather let an injury fester inside

us, go over and over it in our heads, and remember every bitter detail. We'd rather talk to **anyone but** the person we're upset with - we easily tell other people about it instead. And because we teach each other to be nice Christians, few people we tell will challenge us. Worse, have we ever told some people about how we've been wronged, only to find out later that we totally misunderstood the situation? Did we ever go back and tell them we had been wrong? Other times we ask someone else to go talk to the person for us. But in Jesus' way of dealing with conflict, the first step is to go talk privately to the person we're upset with and no one else.

"And if they listen to you, you have won them over." The reason we go is not to give them a piece of our mind. We're to go to mend the relationship, we're to go ready to forgive. In fact, if we're not ready to forgive, we're not ready to go. Going to someone to explain how what they did or said or didn't do or didn't say hurt or harmed us takes humility, because we all need grace and forgiveness. And if they listen, we regain the relationship. Done right, step one is usually enough.

But Jesus is realistic that step one isn't always enough. So if they refuse to listen, if they arch their back and say, "I don't care," take step 2. Gather 1 or 2 others and go talk with the person again. Having 2 witnesses was the Old Testament courtroom process for determining whether someone was guilty or not. You couldn't convict a person of a crime without 2 or 3 witnesses. So we need to ask for help from two wise Christians, not 2 close friends who will always take our side. Then go and talk with the person again together.

But if that person still refuses to care about the hurt they have caused, step 3 is to bring it before the church. Step three makes it clear we are not talking about some small offense here. I'm not supposed to bring before the church that my husband washed my white blouse with his red shirt and turned my blouse pink. No, it's more serious. And if they will not listen to the church, they are removed from the church- not out of spite or anger, but because reconciliation with brothers and sisters in Christ is of such high priority to Jesus. Like the shepherd who works hard to bring the wayward sheep back to the fold, Jesus calls both parties to work hard at being reconciled.

Step 3 is serious stuff. Churches don't do this very well. Some churches don't take steps 1 and 2 seriously and excommunicate or disfellowship a person without any attempts at reconciliation. They simply take the side of the accuser and the supposed guilty one is out. They often then take Jesus' next words very seriously though and treat the person like a Gentile or a tax collector, writing them off completely. But let's think for a moment: how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? He fed a hungry Gentile crowd, healed the children of two Gentiles, invited a tax collector named Zaccheus to come follow him and another tax collector named Matthew to be one of his 12 apostles. Jesus always had room in his heart for someone to turn around. Even on the cross. When we're offended, do we leave room in our hearts for a person to turn around? Other times churches try to keep peace by ignoring the damage people do - sexual impropriety is swept under the rug or power-hungry or rude members are allowed to keep pushing people around. But ignoring problems doesn't bring peace. Jesus gives us the kingdom way to deal with conflict that takes sin and its harm seriously, but also reflects his loving heart.

Verse 20 is often taken out of context. “²⁰ For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” It’s important to remember that Jesus was still talking about conflict and reconciliation when he said those words. Jesus wasn’t saying that when the attendance in church is low, it’s OK, because where even 2 or 3 are gathered in his name, he will be there. It’s certainly true that Jesus will be with us when we’re small in number, but that’s not Jesus’ point here. Jesus was saying that when 2-3 of us gather in Jesus’ name to do the hard work of reconciliation, we don’t do it alone – he will be with us- guiding us, giving us the strength to speak, the humility to listen and to forgive, and changing our hearts. That’s good news because reconciliation is hard work. Without Christ with us, we won’t do it.

There is a lot in this scripture. So today, let’s focus on step one. Most of the time, it is probably all that is needed. The next time we believe someone has wronged us and our feelings are hurt, let’s commit to following Jesus’ step one- let’s humble ourselves and talk to the person who wronged us, and only them. It’s hard, but it’s Jesus’ way. One way we can all support each other in this step is that before we listen to someone complain to us about someone else, ask them if they’ve talked that person, and if not, tell them to go talk with them first. Don’t agree to be a middle person. And when we go speak privately, let’s be open to the possibility that we may have misunderstood the situation. Let’s not even go until we’ve talked with God first so **our** heart is in the right place. If they listen, you will have won back the relationship. That’s Jesus way.

And this morning, if you are a wandering sheep listening, let Jesus find you. Don’t hide or be afraid, Jesus has room in his heart for anyone who turns around. So I invite you- confess your wandering and let Jesus bring you home.