

Sunday, September 10, 2023
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18, Year A)

Matthew 18.15-20

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/829683442151344>

(Sermon begins at about 20:20)

“Conflict Mediation”

Conflict seems to be an inherent part of what it means to be human. Just look at the world around us. Whether actually the case or not, we seem to be living in one of the most polarized and conflicted periods in our history as a nation. Certainly on the political front, with our two major parties at such odds, there is not even a willingness to reach across the aisle to find common ground. In fact, even within each party there are ideological divisions that sometimes impede the ability for members of the same party to achieve consensus on political positions and establishment of policy. In the broader arena, there are an increasing number of culture wars: conflict between groups over a variety of values, beliefs, and practices. Most notably over such issues as reproductive freedom, gender identity, racial identity, and climate change, to name but a few. Beyond our own borders, add to that increasing political and economic conflict between the US and China, the war in Ukraine, and, just in the last couple of weeks, civil unrest and political upheaval in several other nations.

Of course, conflict is not limited to the political arena or the world stage. Even in the most loving and supportive of relationships, conflict can and does occur on occasion. It doesn't have to be major, leading to blows. You and your partner decide you want to go out for lunch after church, but can't agree on where or what you want to eat. Certainly not a significant form of conflict, but conflict nonetheless.

And then there's the church. Some—usually those outside the church—seem to think that because we are Christians, we are not supposed to engage in conflict. That there isn't any conflict in the church. Which couldn't be further from the truth. Churches are certainly not immune to conflict. If anything, the reality is that churches have historically been hotbeds for conflict. Perhaps because our faith is such a deeply ingrained and intimate part of who we are, we cannot help but have deeply held views on how that faith is to be expressed. When those views bump up against the beliefs of another, conflict can arise. Even within—particularly within—the institutional church. And, if you look closely at Scripture, Jesus himself engaged in conflict. Certainly conflict with the religious authorities of his own day. And even conflict with his own disciples. Remember how just a week ago, Jesus and Peter got into it over the meaning of Messiah. When Jesus revealed what it means for him to be the Messiah, “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’” To which Jesus responded, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Most certainly conflict occurring within Jesus' inner circle, with those closest to him.

So, if Jesus and his closest followers got into it, surely the Church, the Body of Christ in the world, will have an occasional moment or two when people don't agree, leading to conflict. Of course, often times conflicts are not that significant in the grand scheme of things. To the individual parties, maybe, but in reality, not so much. Disagreement over whether we should do Project A or Project B. Disagreement over whether our Bible Study should study this book or that book. Disagreement over whether a committee should meet on Sunday after church or on a weekday evening. None being decisions that are likely to result in fractured relationships or people leaving the church. But then there are those issues that, in the past, have resulted in schism. Just consider the vast number of denominations that exist around the world. Most formed because of significant differences in theological understanding or interpretation of Scripture, resulting in one group breaking with another and forming their own church. Each claiming, explicitly or implicitly, to be the true representation of Christ in the world.

Yes, when two or three are gathered together, there will always be the potential for conflict. And given enough time, almost assuredly conflict will develop in some form or fashion. Even among Christians, even in the Church.

Almost as if anticipating that conflict would occur in churches and faith communities, Jesus, in today's Gospel, lays out a multi-stepped process for conflict mediation. A process for reconciliation. All based on the typical human reactions and responses to conflict.

Jesus begins by implicitly acknowledging how most people tend to deal with conflict. While there are some who are comfortable with, even enjoy, engaging in and confronting conflict head-on, most people tend to be more or less conflict avoidant. Most of us don't want to deal with the discomfort of having to confront someone. So, we're tempted to just avoid it altogether. Of course, sometimes this avoidance takes the form of the aggrieved party going to a third party and kvetching about the offending party: "you're not going to believe what so-and-so did." While maybe feeling good in the moment, and allowing the aggrieved party to feel self-righteous and, if anything, reinforce just how aggrieved they really were, along with garnering confirmation from a sympathetic third party, the reality is, this does nothing to resolve the conflict.

Instead, Jesus advises, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." In other words, avoiding the issue is not generally a good choice. If anything, it leaves the potential for things to fester, and to get worse. Rather, just bite the bullet and seek to deal with the conflict one-on-one, in a spirit of mutual love and respect, in recognition that both are beloved children of God and siblings in Christ. And more often than not, the direct approach—again, done out of mutual love and respect—is the best approach. Allowing the opportunity for both parties to discuss their concerns and perspectives and reach a mutually acceptable solution. All with the goal of maintaining relationship.

Of course, there are those occasions when this approach does not result in any movement. The offending party may be so entrenched in their position that they are not willing to budge. If that is the case, Jesus says, "take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses." This is similar to step one. The conflicted parties come together, in a spirit of mutual love and respect, to try to find a solution. Although

this approach has the added benefit of bringing in one or two others who might be able to provide a more neutral perspective; provide a more objective approach. Possibly providing new or additional insights those in conflict had not even considered. This added wisdom can facilitate reconciliation, helping the parties in conflict find common ground and a way forward.

If this doesn't work, Jesus then advises that the matter be taken to the church. Not necessarily the whole church, but certainly a representative portion, such as the Vestry or some other subset of the total membership. This has similar advantages to the second step, in that incorporating additional people outside of the conflict provides opportunity for other perspectives or ideas for resolution that had not been previously considered. Incorporating a broader audience also helps to keep things more real. To help keep extreme emotions, even histrionics, in check. That in a larger group, there tends to be greater accountability, as one is going to be less likely to exaggerate what has transpired, to omit key information or details, or to deny their own part in the conflict. After all, it does take two to tango. By bringing the matter into the light of day as opposed to keeping it hidden, there is a greater likelihood that the parties in conflict will be on their best behavior, stay on a more even keel, continue to operate out of mutual love and respect, and thereby achieve a reasonable solution.

Now, if all that does not work, Jesus says there is no choice: "if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Now, many hear this and think Jesus is suggesting going for the nuclear option: advocating for excommunication; expulsion from the community. But he never says that. Remember, Jesus was all about inclusion. He was about keeping everybody at the table if at all possible. Admittedly, there may be situations where the offending party has done something that is toxic, even destructive to the community. If that is truly the case, the wellbeing of the community and its members need to be protected. The message needs to be "knock it off or get out." Although, for Jesus, exclusion is a last resort. And likely doing even more damage along the way.

By using Gentiles and tax collectors as the model for this step in the reconciliation process, Jesus is really saying that, if at all possible, a way needs to be found to keep the offending party within the community. After all, a big part of Jesus' ministry was reaching out to the sinners and tax collectors, reaching out to the Gentiles, and seeking to incorporate them into the community. To help them change as necessary and appropriate to be able to become part of the community. Love, inclusion, mercy, and forgiveness are the order of the day and the hallmark of Jesus' ministry—particularly to those outside the community or in danger of finding themselves on the outside. No, before going for the nuclear option of excommunication, every effort needs to be made to achieve reconciliation: to bring about healing within the community and repairing of relationship. Because when those wounds are not healed, so often they remain, festering below the surface, having a subtle—or not so subtle—impact on the community as a whole. If not manifest immediately, likely to be manifest down the road, when opportunities for healing and reconciliation are long past.

The bottom line is that the wellbeing of the community and of all its members needs to be maintained and preserved if at all possible. That we cannot be so quick to dismiss those with whom we disagree. And even more so, we cannot be so quick to dismiss those with whom we might—and likely will, at one time or another—find ourselves in conflict.

Conflict happens. Even in the Church. As such, we are called to be a place where, when conflict does happen, it is dealt with in a healthy, constructive way. So as to, to the extent possible, preserve the health and integrity of the community and the relationships within that community. To model the very things that are the hallmarks of Jesus' life and ministry: love, mercy, humility, and inclusivity. When those are strained in any way, to be willing to work for reconciliation, liberation, justice, and healing. And, in the process, to hopefully be a model for the rest of our society, our nation, and the world, that conflict does not necessarily have the last word.