

Sunday, September 6, 2026
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18A)
Matthew 15.10-28
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Conflict Mediation”

I’m beginning to think I should just not go on vacation. The last couple of years, it seems like every time I return from time away, be it sabbatical or vacation, I am immediately confronted with having to preach on challenging readings. Or rather, readings that address challenging issues. But I do need an occasional vacation, so maybe I just need to do a better job of scheduling it around the Gospel readings—stick the supply priest with the difficult passages. Although, I suppose Fr. Gary had his share of challenges while I was gone—particularly last week’s conflict between Jesus and Peter, with the famous “Get behind me, Satan!” comment (Mt 16.23), followed by the command that “any [who] want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mt 16.24).

The reality is, the Scriptures should challenge us, precisely because the Scriptures reflect the truth of everyday life. And, I think we would all agree that life can, at times, be challenging. And while some Scripture passages may seem challenging, it is often these very passages that provide us with the guidance we need to navigate the challenges of everyday life—both individually and communally.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus takes on an issue that so many of us would just as soon avoid: conflict. So many of us are, by nature, conflict avoidant. But the reality is, conflict is a very real possibility whenever you bring people together. As Jesus says at the end of today’s Gospel, “where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them.” To which you could also note that where two or three are gathered together, there is the potential for conflict. And yes, as hard as it may be to believe, even in the church. And some would say, especially in the church. After all, whenever you are dealing with something as personal and intimate as one’s faith, one’s beliefs, one’s worship practices, there is going to be the potential for disagreement. Sometimes those disagreements are huge. Just consider the Great Schism of 1054, when the single Christian Church split into the Western Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Or the Reformation in the 16th century, resulting in various Protestant Churches separating from the Roman Catholic Church—our own tradition among them. But many conflicts are smaller, less consequential in the grand scheme of things. Disagreement over Rite I vs Rite II. Disagreement over music vs no music at worship. Disagreement over red wine vs white wine at the Eucharist. Disagreement over the color of carpet in the sanctuary. Although, sometimes, even these seemingly innocuous disagreements—ones that are hardly salvation issues—can and do occasionally develop into knock-down drag-out conflicts. And, of course, between the likes of the Great Schism and which liturgical rite to use are the full array of disagreements and conflicts that can—and left unaddressed, do—have the very real potential for harm to the community and its members.

Having the unique insight into human nature that he did, Jesus outlines a process for dealing with conflicts that arise within a community. He talks specifically about conflict within the church—“if another member of the church sins against you.” However, the basic approach is

applicable to any situation, from conflict in any organizational setting such as the workplace, to global conflicts. Scaled accordingly, of course.

In laying out his conflict mediation process, Jesus wisely recognizes the natural human tendency to avoid conflict. And that when conflict does arise, we are tempted to not deal directly with the one we are in conflict, but to gossip—to kvetch to others about it. Airing grievances in an echo chamber of like-minded individuals. Which does no good in solving the conflict. If anything, it starts to create “sides,” potentially expanding the conflict, with the possibility of dividing and truly impacting the community as a whole. With the temptation, if things become heated enough, to view our opponent as unwelcome, perhaps not even worthy of being part of the community if that’s the way they are going to be. With this recognition of human nature relative to dealing with conflict (or not), Jesus identifies a simple—although not necessarily easy—four step process for conflict mediation. A process which is parallel to virtually any conflict mediation process you would find in any organizational setting today.

The first step, according to Jesus, is to go directly to the source of the issue and share your concerns. No avoiding the issue, but tackling it head-on lest it fester or get out of control. The idea being to engage in direct, one-on-one communication with the person or persons who have offended. This allows for a private opportunity to express one’s concerns, and provides space for the offending person to clear up any misunderstanding. And where appropriate, to apologize and make amends. In so doing, sending a subtle message that you respect the other enough to try to clear things up privately, without embarrassing them in public. And, at the same time, being humble enough to recognize that you may misunderstand the situation and, if so, are open to being corrected and learning from it. Conflict is, after all, a two-way street.

If this first step does not produce the desired resolution, Jesus advises that you take one or two others with you. Not to gang up on the offending individual, but to provide witnesses. It’s amazing how tensions are often diffused when there are witnesses present. Heated discourse often becomes more civil. The potential for exaggeration or blowing things out of proportion is reduced. Bringing in one or two others communicates the same respect and humility of the one-on-one approach, but with the added benefit of the wisdom and experience of others to help resolve the conflict. This added wisdom and experience often being beneficial in helping the two conflicting parties find common ground, which is quite often the key to moving forward.

If this second step does not produce the desired resolution, Jesus advises that you take the matter to the entire community. In this case, the church. For, if resolution has not been achieved to this point, the conflict has become either intractable or has escalated to the point that it will inevitably impact the entire community. And for the health and wellbeing of the community, broader-scale wisdom and action are required. Now, what it means to take the matter to the entire community can vary. Sometimes—often—it is not feasible or even advisable to air a conflict to the entire community. What Jesus means in taking the matter to the community would rather imply a representative cross-section of the community, with the authority to act on behalf of the community. In our own polity, that might mean taking a matter to the Vestry, as the elected leaders who represent the diversity of the congregation. However it is defined, this is not just the part of the community that will likely agree with one side or the other, but who will be in a position to make an objective assessment of the situation. Taking the

matter to the broader community provides for accountability, for both sides of the conflict. For, as with the previous step, being heard in the full light of day helps minimize, or at least reduce, potential for exaggeration, misrepresentation of facts, and heated exchanges. And as with the second step, providing increased wisdom and experience from which to more objectively assess the conflict and to discern common ground for resolution.

Now, if this third step does not produce the desired resolution, Jesus says, “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Wait, what? Consider how Gentiles and tax collectors were regarded in Israel in Jesus’ time. They were excluded. They were shunned. Which is often how this whole passage is interpreted. That if the offending party is not willing to change and make amends, they are to be kicked out?

Well, maybe. If an offender is unabashed and insists on engaging in destructive or dysfunctional behavior, sometimes, for the good of the community, the offender needs to be shown the door. For the health of the remainder of the community and its members, such a one needs to be removed, excluded, either permanently or until such time that they are willing to abide by the norms and practices of the community. After all, the community has a mission that needs to be carried out. And if someone is inhibiting or interfering with that mission and with the message the community is called to proclaim, action needs to be taken, painful though it may be.

But on the other hand, Jesus, through his general approach to ministry does make it clear that exclusion is the last resort. The absolute last resort. Every effort needs to be made to seek to include the offending person to the extent possible. This is indicated in several ways. First off, this Gospel story is actually sandwiched in between two parables that focus on love, mercy, and inclusion: the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the unforgiving servant. In both these parables, every effort is made to save the one who is lost, and to seek forgiveness and reconciliation for the one who is misguided and unrepentant. And second, with respect to Gentiles and tax collectors, these are the very object of Jesus’ expanding mission and ministry. What Jesus’ ministry demonstrates time and time again is that when shown the unconditional love of Christ, these supposed outsiders are ultimately included in surprising and grace-filled ways. Sometimes—often—what is truly needed by the one viewed as outside is to be heard, to feel they are indeed loved and valued. Resulting in the potential for repentance, for transformation. Not just for the one offending, but for the community as a whole. Transformation that leads to reconciliation. Allowing us to live more fully into what it means to be the Body of Christ.

To this point, Jesus concludes his discourse on conflict mediation with a telling statement. Two actually. First is “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Repeating the authority he confers upon Peter just a few chapters before. That as the Body of Christ, we are called to establish appropriate conduct for the Church. What we do in our day-to-day operations as the Church, what we do particularly when faced with difficult situations, establishes the norms for conduct for our community. Sets the precedence for how the Body of Christ is to manifest itself.

And the second telling statement is “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Implying that we cannot truly gather together as the Body of Christ, we

cannot gather with Christ, if we are not willing to do the hard work of seeking to have mercy, to have forgiveness, to operate out of love, and to include those who may prove to be challenging at times.

Today's Gospel reading, from first to last, presents a challenge for us as a community of faith, as the Body of Christ. Conflicts happen. Even in the church. Especially in the church. We are not called to be a place free from conflict. That is just not realistic. But we are called to be a place that provides a loving and caring space for all—even those who may be challenging at times. As such, we are called to be a place where, when conflict does rise, we are willing to do the difficult work of finding healthy and constructive ways to engage and work through differences. To seek common ground, to stay together at the table, remembering and holding on to our shared purpose to love and serve our Lord and to minister to God's people. When we are able to make this happen, we will find that we are ultimately stronger for the effort, and truly living into what it means to be the Body of Christ.