

Matthew 18: 15-20

Sept. 4, 2011

Gathered in Community

Over the years, I have heard many stories about families who don't get along. Brothers and sisters who haven't spoken in years. Grown children who cut all ties with their parents. Parents who disown their grown children.

In movies and on tv, these failed relationships are the fuel for many jokes--- the uncomfortable tension between family members on holidays, the talking behind each other's backs, the dread of Christmas dinner together---

The sniping and bitter remarks made about each other.

About each other and almost never **to** each other. Talking behind other people's backs. When it happens between people who have no relationship, who are just acquaintances, we call it gossip.

What do we call it when it's among family? Between people who are supposed to love each other? The first word I think of is destructive. I could add to that, nasty, ugly, sad, and even --- Evil.

But then, of course I have no personal experience with any of this.

And neither do any of you----I'm sure!

All of us all get along with our families 100% of the time. There are never any problems---no big problems and not any small ones, either.

But this is the scripture from the lectionary this week---how to deal with conflict between brothers and sisters. Of course, the passage is talking about conflict within the church, but the Greek words that are translated as "member of the church" in the NRSV is more accurately translated as "brother or sister."

The church is, after all, the Family of God, and so we can talk about the problems within the church very appropriately the same way that we talk about family problems. The same way conflict is best resolved in the home is the way that works best at church.

We can look to families in the Bible to find out how people in those days took care of family trouble -----

We read about Jacob and his brother Esau. Jacob tricked Esau out of his birthright in return for a bowl of food. Not a very loving thing to do. They were eventually reconciled after many wasted years of separation because Jacob knew that he had done wrong and because Esau forgave him.

And then there are Jacob's sons---twelve of them! The bunch of them got jealous because Jacob clearly loved Joseph best, so they threw him into a pit, talked about killing him, had another conflict over that and finally decided to only sell him as a slave and stop short of murder. They were also finally reconciled because Joseph forgave them when he saw that they had changed, that they loved his little brother Benjamin and their father Jacob enough to be willing to sacrifice their lives for them.

There are many more examples of family conflict in the Old Testament, but let's look at the New Testament.

We can start with the mother of Jesus. Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth when they are both pregnant and they rejoice together. No squabbling about whose son will be greater or any harsh words. Also no example of how to resolve conflict because there wasn't any.

And then I remember another Mary---Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus. A little conflict there!

Mary, you remember, was sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to him speak and teach, when Martha, having already made lots of noise in the kitchen, banging around the pots and pans trying to give a hint to Mary to come and help, finally came into the living room and, instead of speaking directly to her sister, put Jesus in the middle.

Here is what Luke tells us---

“Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help

me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.’”

Martha orders Jesus to order her sister to come and help her, and he doesn't do it. In fact, you might say that he is saying to Martha to come and sit down, too!

That conflict might have only been for that one day, or it might have been a chronic problem. Maybe Mary was always leaving the housework to her sister while she did other things. Maybe what Jesus said to Martha resolved the problem, or maybe it didn't.

We don't know that, but Mary and Martha lived in the same house, and they both loved Jesus, just in different ways. Martha loved him with her strength, serving him good food and drink, whereas Mary loved him with her mind, learning all he had to teach.

Did they understand that? Did that knowledge help to resolve their conflict?

We don't know.

What is clear from this story is that Jesus did not resolve the conflict for them. He didn't do what Martha told him to do. He didn't give any instruction for them to follow the rest of their lives. He only spoke truth in the moment.

So when someone comes to us and tells us something about someone else, that's a good example for us to follow. Whether we say, "You need to talk to that person about it" or "I don't really want to hear this" or something else, it needs to be truth, spoken in love.

In our reading from Matthew this morning, we hear Jesus saying that if you have a problem with one of your brothers or sisters, you should go directly to that person, one on one, and talk it out.

Instead of going to a third person and complaining or asking for help or to take your side, try to resolve the conflict between just you and that other person. Many times it will just be a misunderstanding and having a conversation will clear up everything. And if it's a little more complicated, then at least a mutual understanding and agreement might be reached.

And if it isn't, Jesus tells us to take two or three other people as witnesses to avoid the "My word against hers" problem.

The third step is to take the problem in front of the whole congregation so at least there won't be any secrets! Because secrets can damage the unity of the church. They can break the communion within the Body of Christ. Resentments can build up and pretty soon there is division instead of harmony. So no secrets!

And taking it to the congregation can also bring in other points of view, other voices of wisdom that might point out to both parties another way of looking at the conflict, a clearer way of explaining each person to the other.

But please remember that taking it to the congregation is the third step, not the first!

And if the conflict cannot be resolved by taking it to the congregation, Jesus says to let that person be to you "as a Gentile and a tax collector!" Now, this is very uncharacteristic language for Jesus. Typically, to Jesus, Gentiles and tax collectors are people to spend time with, to build relationships with. After all, Matthew himself was a tax collector!

So this was just to make a point. He was saying “Don’t continue on. Don’t spend any more energy on that person. Don’t let yourself be used or abused or caught up in a never-ending conflict. Just drop it!”

Rather than disrupt the whole congregation, just go on. Quit talking about it. It’s as if it doesn’t exist. Maybe the congregation will ask the other person to find another church. Or maybe others will point out the truth to both of you and resolve the conflict!

But if you never approach the other person, if you talk behind their back, if you spread rumors and anger, it will disrupt the Body of Christ. Relationships will be broken as people begin to take sides between you.

Imagine if Mary and Martha kept approaching their brother Lazarus, each one complaining about the other. Now, Lazarus can tell them to talk to each other directly and not involve him. Or he can simply point out to Martha that Mary does indeed do her share of work around the house, just not that one night when Jesus was visiting.

And then he can point out to Mary that Martha works very hard at providing hospitality to guests and it wouldn’t have hurt her to miss a few minutes and go help Martha get the food ready.

But what would happen if he decided that Mary was right and that Martha was wrong, or vice versa! If he took sides, the other sister would be very upset. She might even move out, or throw the other one out.

Or they could still all stay in the house, not speaking, not connecting with each other. Tensions would be high all the time until maybe Lazarus' blood pressure was so high that he dropped dead, and then the sisters would at least be able to cry together and blame Jesus for not being there.

And then Jesus could come along and resurrect Lazarus, and maybe such a miracle would include reconciliation between the two sisters!

I'm not saying that's the way it happened. I'm only saying it could have been that way!

Reconciliation is the key word here. These instructions from Jesus about how to resolve conflict have the goal of reconciling brothers and sisters who are in conflict. Not to just gloss things over and sweep them under the rug, but to restore the relationship between the people!

Because the fellowship of the church is all about relationship.

In South Africa, after years of the abuse named apartheid, it finally ended. The protests and work of the African National Congress, including Nelson Mandela, finally abolished apartheid in 1994, but there was a lot of healing that needed to happen before the new democracy could be successful.

It could have turned into years of retribution and retaliation toward the Anglo population. Revenge could have kept the legal system and the new government tied up for decades and maybe centuries.

So with great wisdom, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee was formed. People who had been hurt by apartheid could testify. People guilty of benefiting from apartheid could speak as well, confessing and asking for amnesty. At least in a representative way, people who had been victims and people who had victimized could face each other and see each other's deeper humanity.

Instead of seeing each other as less than human, they could see, instead, someone whom they could be in relationship with---someone who deserved human rights or someone who had made mistakes and was sorry.

And the country could move forward.

Once conflict has been brought out with truth, reconciliation can take place.

My brothers and sisters, today we are invited to the Lord's Table. Part of the sacrament of Holy Communion is to ask for forgiveness and be reconciled. This is not just something we do between us and God. This is something we do between us!

Holy Communion is not just about our relationship with God! Communion is broader than that! It involves our relationships with each other!

Some churches believe that people have to properly prepare themselves for Communion, that unless they have prayed and fasted and taken certain steps, people should not come to the table of the Lord.

I will not tell you that. But I will tell you that it's not just between you and God. It's between you and your brothers and sisters.

If there is something between you and a brother or a sister, you need to take care of that. Talk to them. Resolve your differences. Be truthful in love and respect, and see Christ in their eyes.

It would be awkward to do that right now, I know, but at least make the decision to be reconciled.

After you do, come back to the Lord's Table and see how much deeper and richer Holy Communion will be.

Come to the Table of the Lord, where love and grace and mercy are piled high! Where we all join hands without holding anything back, without anything between us to damage the communion! Where we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, who died for us all.

Amen.