

I wonder if you, like me, are thinking what is going on that Jesus needs to tell his disciples how to resolve conflict within the community.

We've actually skipped ahead a couple of chapters in Matthew's gospel from last week. This chapter begins with the disciples asking Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" If that isn't a question fraught with the possibility of conflict, I don't know what is.

So, Jesus, concerned with conflict in the community, either in his lifetime or sometime in the future, gives some pretty practical advice. First, have a private conversation. Resolution can often happen most easily without involving others. But if that doesn't work, take one or two others along with you as witnesses in order that the conflict may be resolved.

The idea of witnesses harkens back to Old Testament times when the law required two witnesses to a crime before pronouncing sentence – usually the sentence of death – but often, later, exile from the community. This exile was never meant to be permanent. There was always the possibility of restoration once sins were atoned for and conflict was resolved.

Finally, Jesus says if the conflict remains tell the church. Here Jesus uses the word *ecclesia* meaning assembly. He is talking about the community not the institution as the place for mediation and conflict resolution. And it is from here that a non-repentant offender would be exiled until fault was admitted, forgiveness was asked, and peace was found between two conflicting parties.

With an eye toward Jerusalem and his death and resurrection, Jesus empowers his disciples to forgive when conflict is resolved, or not forgive when conflict continues, with these, often confusing, words, "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." In this context, Jesus most likely is alluding to the disciples' ability to expel and readmit church members as a response to conflict and resolution. Up until now it has been the Pharisees wielding this power over the Jewish community with a zealous fervor often not representative of the love, peace, and justice of the kingdom which Jesus has come to proclaim. With the expectation that the disciples make their decisions grounded in "what would Jesus do," Jesus seems to be ceding this responsibility to his followers.

To be exiled from one's homeland, defined either by birth or choice, must be a dire consequence of some awful action, and in Jesus' view must always allow for the possibility of redemption and return. It must never be a frivolous or capricious action born of malice or worse. There is no "love your neighbor" in sending another human being, against their will, to a foreign land with no chance for return to the community of family and friends in which they make their home. And this will never be the Christian way to resolve conflict of any kind.

The Israelites knew the hell of exile from their homeland when captured and transported to Babylon. There they were subjected to foreign rule and enslaved. The expectation was that they would abandon their one true God and worship the many Babylonian gods that had, seemingly, defeated their God when they were captured and exiled. Yet, even as they believed that this was God's punishment for their wickedness in turning their backs on God, they did not. They repented. And they were returned to their homeland to rebuild their lives.

We hear from the prophet Ezekiel, who was among these captives, “says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways.” God’s plan for God’s people always includes the possibility of repentance and return in the face of conflict and sin.

Our liturgy presents a number of opportunities to practice this. In the prayer book Invitation to a Holy Lent, we hear that this was a time when notorious sinners, now repentant, could return to the church.

We confess our sins, things done and things left undone. Our failure to love our neighbors as ourselves. All the ways we separate ourselves from the love of God – and then, because of God’s unconditional love, we are not only forgiven but strengthened in all goodness, to continue our lives as God intends.

At the end of the Liturgy of the Word, the first part of our service, we are invited to share the Peace. “The Peace of the Lord be always with you,” invites the presider and you reply, “And also with you.” Here we pause and greet our neighbor – not as a “hello, good morning,” but as a symbolic testament that we are, in fact, at peace with our neighbor. Not just the person sitting next to us, but our neighbor as defined by Jesus. In other words, all our neighbors, near and far, known and unknown. We are meant to think about this – and to mean it.

From here we shift to Holy Communion with one of several offertory sentences found in the Book of Common Prayer on pages 376-377. I tend to use the same one every week because I have it memorized, “Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God.” This is a verse from the letter to the Ephesians and does point to the agape (or love) meal we are about to receive. But there are others, like this one from Matthew, which relates well to our gospel today, “If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother (or sister) has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

We are meant to present ourselves as offerings to God at the altar upon which the body and blood of Christ is prepared so we can then become the Body and Christ to our weary and broken world. How can we do that if we are at enmity with another? Still, we are not meant to be perfect. Only God is perfect. And we do not come to the altar worthy, but in many ways broken. We do, though, come with our best intentions, and in that we often find ourselves healed, made whole again – put back together again – welcomed home from whatever has exiled us from the love of God.

Conflict is everywhere today and we have to face it courageously and act boldly because being Christian, living a Christian life, means we always make amends, with our neighbor, with ourselves, with God. We are created to be in relationship, with each other and with God. These relationships do not remain healthy by accident. They require honesty, courage, patience, forgiveness, and the willingness to remain in conversation when walking away would be easier.

When we waver, or forget, thankfully we have Jesus, in scripture and in our liturgy, to point the way. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Here, among us. Now and always. Calling us in from exile. Healing us and making us whole.