

Sermon: Proper 18A
Title: Conflict Resolution
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord. Grace, mercy, and peace are yours from the Triune God. Amen.

Quite the Gospel text we are faced with again this week. Between last week dealing with stumbling blocks, and this week dealing with strife between humans, I feel God is trying to show us how hard it can be to be human. How tough it can be to live and breathe in this fallen world. But lest you fear, there is always good news to be gleaned from our texts. That is the beauty of the Gospels.

Bishop Shay recommended I read the Message version of our text this week. And I was so grateful for the suggestion, because it helped un-muddy some of the text this week that we just read. I am going to read the first portion of our Gospel text one more time, but this time from the Message version of the Bible. See if you can hear the differences and take note.

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ “If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you’ve made a friend. If he won’t listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. If he still won’t listen, tell the church. If he won’t listen to the church, you’ll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God’s forgiving love.

Often when we think of this text and how it applies to our own life, I find that we often skip over steps one and two (talk to the individual, talk to the individual with one or two), and proceed straight to three (telling the whole church). How many of us have seen [or done] the Facebook/social media rant where we *don’t name names*, but go on and on about something or somehow we have been wronged? Or gossiping with one another about someone else? Or sending a hate-filled text message to someone?

All of these things, and so much more, go against what we see in our Gospel text this morning. Yet, it is a human desire to “get people on our sides,” to blast the information from our side, and persuade people that we are in the right, that we have been wronged, that we know all. We, as humans, will do everything in our power to feel validated, even if that means blasting things in places they shouldn’t be. We take and spread our pain as widely as we can in hopes of making ourselves feel better. Often at the expense of another. And rarely does it work.

So then, when we are wronged by people, how then are we supposed to respond, if we aren't going to blast it on social media, gossip, or spread hate filled messages? I am so glad you asked. Today's text talk about this **exact** thing! It's like God knew we would struggle to get along with one another. Like God knew that our feelings would get hurt, and like injured animals, we would choose to lash out over reconciliation.

Verse 15: If a fellow believer hurts you - we are going to stop right there for a quick second. If another member of the church, the body of Christ, sins, **then** we move on to the next part of the verse. But so often, we want to go out into the world, beyond those doors, and find everything that everybody is doing wrong. I know I can be guilty of that charge. But that isn't quite what Jesus is saying here.

There are plenty of verses outlining how to deal with our neighbors outside of the church. Today's text is specific to those who are fellow siblings in Christ. If someone outside of the church sins, then you go back to Matthew 5, the sermon on the mount: love others as I have loved you. Or you find yourself in 1 Corinthians 5.12: What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? We are called to love those outside the church, not judge them.

It is also worth noting in our text today before we proceed farther that Jesus uses the word **sin** in our passage here. This is something relationship breaking, egregious. It isn't someone just looking at you the wrong way. Also, it doesn't have to be a direct offence, either. You could see something in someone that is causing harm to other relationships or to their relationship with God, and then you would proceed forward in our text.

I feel a bit like a game show host at the moment: please proceed to step one! But when we so often skip over steps one and two, and proceed to air our dirty laundry in places it shouldn't be aired, I feel redundancy and a closer look at the passage is warranted.

If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend.

In humility and love, you go to the person who has wronged you or is harming another relationship, and you attempt to have a conversation. One-on-one. You don't bring anyone with you, you don't broadcast what you are doing, you gently engage in conversation. The dignity of the offender should be protected, because you would want the same thing if the roles were reversed. If the conversation is fruitful and well received, Jesus says you have made a friend. If not, proceed to the next step.

As an aside, this will only work in safe, sane, consensual friendships and relationships. In no way am I endorsing attempting to talk to an abusive partner, or someone who is generally unsafe. Please do not put yourself in danger in order to have these conversations, that isn't what Jesus would have wanted. Please keep that in mind as you move forward with me in this text. Also, sometimes professional help is needed

when engaging in conversations with one another. Safety is always the number one priority.

Verse 16: If he won't listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again.

It is time to try again. You take a couple trusted people, who aren't going to proclaim the situation across the nation, and you once again attempt to have a conversation. If it is successful, you have made a friend. If the person who is participating in harming behavior still will not listen, then you move to step three. But still not the step three that we think it might be.

Verse 17: If he still won't listen, tell the church. If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love.

Here is where you are allowed to bring in the wider church body. Because if you aren't being successful one on one or in a small group, hopefully the church body can help reconcile the parties or bring closure to whatever it is that may be going on.

The verse ends with the big kicker. If he still won't listen, you start over and confront them with their need for repentance and God's grace. It is the gentiles and tax collectors that Jesus came to minister to. So if the person causing harm won't listen, we are to treat them like one of the least, the last, and the lost. Welcoming them into our fold, helping them on their journey.

Jesus **does not** allow us to write anybody off. If the person causing harm listens to any of these steps, great, you've made a friend. If they don't, we treat them like someone we are sent to love and nurture.

In Jesus' world there is no ghosting, no posting, and no anonymous letters!

Why? Why go to all this trouble?

Because the church isn't a perfect place, and we need to know how to deal with conflict when it arises. And these steps are laid out like this because we could be wrong. What if you went to the offender one on one and realized you were wrong? You then saved the dignity of the not-offender and you also didn't bring shame on anyone.

The church should be a place of hope and reconciliation. And when we deal with our problems this way, church starts to embody that place. A place where people can be reconciled to one another, in modesty and humble natures.

Galatians 6:1: Siblings, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.

We should restore that person gently, step number one.

Think about the story of David and Nathan. David in the Old Testament coveted Uriah's wife. David slept with Bathsheeba and got her pregnant. Then sent Uriah to the front lines to be killed. And then finally married Bathsheeba. Nathan, in attempting to point out David's sins, told him a story about a shepherd and his one sheep. Nathan could have blasted David, could have gossiped and sent anonymous letters, but instead confronted him in humility and restored David to the kingdom.

Then finally our gospel ends with a reminder that whatever we bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever we loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. This tells us that whatever we do on earth has cosmic implications. And from our earlier verses we learn that those cosmic implications should be toward reconciliation. Always toward reconciliation.

No ghosting, no posting, and no anonymous letters! Instead always work towards reconciliation. First one on one, then with one or two more, and then finally with the help of the church.

Let us pray: You call us to love one another as you have loved us. Help us to reconcile with each other, without shame and always within human dignity. Be with us as we work to bring about your kingdom in the world. Teach us, O Lord. Give us understanding. Lead us in the path of your commandments. Turn our hearts to your decrees. Turn our eyes from looking at vanities. Confirm to your servants your promise. Turn away the disgrace that we dread. In your righteousness give us life. Amen.