

**14 Pentecost
September 6, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

THE SERMON I DIDN'T PREACH!

Has someone ever come to you and said, "We need to talk?" Or, have you had to go to someone and said those four words to them ... "We need to talk?" Most of the time, if another person approaches us with those words, they're not saying they want to chat about the weather, or the latest sports event, or share the latest celebrity gossip. They're saying, "Something is broken between us, and we need to sort it out."

What Caren and I know about conflict in congregations is that it is most often not handled very well. Many church leaders are conflict avoiders ... they sweep any discord under the rug. Often there is gossip ... and rumors ... and passive-aggressive games. During a lot of the church conflict we experienced, people used silence as a weapon ... they wouldn't talk to former friends and neighbors if they were on opposite sides of a disagreement. Or, just the opposite ... they were very vocal about their positions and this only intensified the quarrel. Sometimes, if all other tactics failed, people just abandoned the community altogether, and joined another.

In this week's Gospel, Jesus offers us a radically different path. In fact, he doesn't just offer it ... he tells us plainly that the way we conduct relationships here and now has direct consequences for God's coming kingdom: "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." In other words, the depth, health, and quality of our relationships within the church really matter ... they matter eternally.

The first thing to notice about Jesus's teaching in this passage is its recognition of reality. Unlike us, who assume that because we are part of a faith community, we should either not experience conflict at all, or cover it up with a bland "niceness." Jesus takes it for granted that we will disagree and hurt each other. He starts with the baseline assumption that conflict within the beloved community is normal and natural. The question is not whether we'll wound each other with our words and actions, but how we should proceed when we do.

By the time Caren and I were called into a congregation in conflict a lot of pain had usually been inflicted. People had lost trust in the leadership and each other ... each side of the argument felt betrayed by the other ... and there was significant anxiety throughout the system.

Our first role was to be present to all the people without taking sides. We were the "non-anxious presence" in the midst of anxiety. When we fulfilled that role well, the congregation's

anxiety diminished giving us room to ask questions, and begin the process of coaching emotionally mature persons into new leadership positions. We interviewed people from both sides of the dispute. Then we gave a report to the whole congregation and named ... said out loud ... the real problem. Sometimes it wasn't what others thought or said, but trust and transparency were important, and with it came healing, and a new vision for the congregation's future.

Vital to this entire process was a roadmap, with specific directions at each junction. In a sense, what Jesus lays out in this Gospel are rules of engagement, and the principles of love and respect that should undergird them ... a roadmap with clear directions applicable to all involved. There are no shortcuts ... secret back doors and alleyways. Just a clear setoff rules and principles.

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault..." This principle may seem obvious, yet, all too often it is missed. Jesus begins by teaching us that when we experience conflict in the community, we need to name it. We should not allow a broken relationship to wither in the shallows, all authenticity and transparency lost. We should engage. We should risk honest conversation. We should strive for genuine healing ... not simply the illusion of harmony.

This is true regardless of what side of the conflict we're on. My temptation as I read this Gospel passage is to place myself always in the position of the would-be reconciler. What should I do if someone sins against me? But what if the situation is reversed? Am I willing to hear hard truths from the people I offend? Do I value honesty and authenticity enough to surrender my privilege and power, and listen without defensiveness when a brother or sister confronts my sinfulness? Can I stop shielding myself behind my "good intentions," and sit with the actual impact my actions have on others? In the end, do I care about reconciliation, justice, repentance, and restoration as much as Jesus does? Or, have I settled for a spiritual life in the shallows?

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Even as Jesus stresses the importance of honest engagement, he calls for discretion, kindness, and care. If at all possible, protect the privacy and dignity of the people you approach. Do not drag their names through the mud. Do not expose and humiliate them. Do not use the conflict as an opportunity to gossip-monger, one-up your opponent, or split the wider community. Do whatever is possible to affirm the dignity and humanity of the person you confront.

Needless to say, we live in a social media culture in which voyeurism reigns. Too often, we take a perverse delight in watching others fall from grace. When we've been hurt, we forget that we, too, are frail, foolish, and prone to error. When we hurt others, we lash out at our victims, publicly dehumanizing them for the sake of protecting our own reputations. All of this, Jesus says, falls miserably short of God's desires for the beloved community.

“If you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” Again, Jesus harbors no illusions about how challenging conflict-management can be. Sometimes, a one-on-one conversation won’t suffice. When that’s the case, the Gospel tells us to bring in a few more people ... not to spread gossip ... not to gang up on the wrongdoer ... not to escalate the conflict ... but to make sure that the truth is guarded, honored, articulated, and remembered as we work towards reconciliation. Remember, Jesus said “two or three witnesses,” not two or three friends. Sometimes, the most helpful witness is someone the other can trust.

When we feel injured, it’s easy to resort to exaggeration to press our own advantage. When we wound someone else, it’s easy to deflect, minimize, and pivot away from what really happened in order to defend ourselves. But if we are going to take Jesus seriously, we have an obligation to guard the truth, and sometimes, we need others to come alongside us in our efforts to do so. This is especially the case in our current moment, when the very concept of “truth” is being attacked and desecrated on every side ... as if it doesn’t matter ... as if it’s up for grabs. But, in fact, truth does matter, and it is not up for grabs. Jesus insists that we guard against falsehoods in our dealings with each other.

“If the member refuses to listen, tell it to the church.” Here in the West, this principle might be the hardest one for us to swallow. In fact, it might even offend us. Why? Because we tend to think of the church as a voluntary association of autonomous individuals. We think this way, not because the Bible offers us any sanction or justification for doing so, but because we don’t want to surrender the idols of individualism and personal independence.

In contrast, the Scriptures describe the church as a body, each part wholly interdependent on every other. When conflicts arise in our midst, what’s at stake is not my personal feelings or your personal liberty. What’s at stake is the health and well-being of the entire body ... the collective ... the whole system. In this week’s Gospel passage, Jesus even goes so far as to say that God’s presence among us depends on the wholeness and vitality of the beloved community: *“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”* In other words, it’s in our togetherness, our unity, our interconnectedness, that God promises to be with us. Our refusal to accept this deep spiritual truth doesn’t make it any less true. Privacy and personal liberty might be a cherished value of the cultures we live in, but it’s not the currency of the family of God.

Sometimes, Jesus says, all of our efforts at reconciliation will fail, and we will lose a member of the community ... it just might happen that we fail to “regain” a brother or sister. The implication here is that such losses should be met with grief ... with mourning ... with broken hearts. Even when a conflict escalates to a point where we must break with an offender for the health of the church, our reaction to that break must never be self-righteous glee. The fracturing of the body is not an occasion for gloating. We have lost a limb, an organ, our own flesh and blood. The appropriate response is lament.

“If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” At first glance, this instruction might sound like it gives us permission to shun or “cancel” people with whom we experience deep conflict. But consider how Jesus treats Gentiles and tax collectors. Recall how he treats Zaccheus, or the Roman centurion’s servant, or the Samaritan woman at the well, or the Syrophenician woman and her sick daughter. In every instance, Jesus offers the outsider love, care, healing, hope, and compassion. He doesn’t ever “get rid of” the people he doesn’t like, or whose values and beliefs don’t match his own. He continues to love them as creatively and authentically as he can.

The implication is for us to do the same. Even as we acknowledge and grieve brokenness, even as we make painful decisions to safeguard the church, even as we recognize that the insider is now “outside,” we practice hospitality. We extend care. We hold open the possibility of repentance, reconciliation, restoration, and renewal. Even in the mess and muck of life together, we cling to the promise of resurrection, and honor the outsider as the beloved of God.

What an interesting teaching to hear at this time in this place. How powerfully it speaks to the historical moment we occupy. Has there ever been a time when we’ve felt so divided, so partisan, so deeply entrenched in our own perspectives, cliques, and subcultures, as we do right now? We can barely even hear each other anymore. Yes, Jesus uses the word “church,” but I believe the beloved community is much bigger ... so much bigger than any one little congregation. We are not talking about St. Cyprian’s ... or any other church on the corner. We are talking about all people everywhere that are gathered in a community for the health of everyone in that community ... little congregations of all faiths ... denominations and religions and even those who are outside of religious beliefs ... hamlets, villages, towns, cities, states, and nations.

What would it be like to live into the high calling of the beloved community here, now, in this profoundly troubled moment of conflict and division? What would it be like for all the world to know that we take seriously a way to get through conflict ... a way that Jesus took seriously?

Are we ready? Are we willing? We need to talk.

Amen.