

St. Marks Episcopal Church – September 10, 2023

Pentecost 15 A – Track 2

William H. Grow, Jr.

Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20

Forgiveness

In reading this Gospel, I realized there were a plethora of ways ideas could be spun into a sermon. In order to keep today's message to an hour or two, it became apparent the number of thought to be explored should be reduced. One thought, for example, brought to mind a discussion we had a few weeks ago about "minding the crack". If you recall, a crack can occur between two people when they have a disagreement, or conflict. This is what the devil looks for. If the crack or conflict is not quickly fixed, it can grow and fester and become more than it should be. It can cause irreparable damage and harm.

It seemed we had discussed this topic enough and there were a couple others that were also discarded. It seemed like the most important item to discuss is the framework for conflict resolution that Jesus proposes in this Gospel.

Before we get into that, however, let's consider why we might have conflict in the first place. All of us have thoughts and ideas and sometimes these can be in conflict with those of others. Their idea may be better than ours, but if we are not open to considering what others have to say, it can cause conflict.

Another source of conflict may well be the way we were raised. Some of us seem to be very competitive. This is all well and good as long as the competitive drive does not lead us to have to win at any cost. All too often the cost may be the loss of a friend or relative. We seldom stop to think that for every winner, there is a loser. The drive to win may lead us to go too far. It may create a gap that is too large to easily repair.

There are many other ways misunderstandings can lead to conflict. I am sure each of us could easily come up with a couple more. But suffice it to at least understand that there are many ways we can get into conflict and move on to resolution. The Gospel refers to problems in the Christian community at that time. However, the framework provided is broad enough it can be used to help resolve many disagreements.

Step one is to seek out the person you are in conflict with and try to discuss the issue again. Perhaps we didn't fully understand what the other person was saying. This would allow for the two parties to reconcile the differences simply by better understanding and clarification in an additional face-to-face conversation.

Step two comes into play if step one fails to resolve the conflict. In this case, additional people are asked to listen with open minds to the two sides of the conflict. Some times when we speak about our standpoint in front of others we may have a tendency to tone down our rhetoric. This in itself is helpful. This, along with having others listen to and discuss the various points of the dispute can often lead to resolution.

The third step is to refer the conflict to the entire group, be it a congregation, work group or other organization that one might be a part of. The threat of taking this action might be enough to get the two parties to resolve the conflict right then and there. I, personally, would find it very difficult to do this. I think it is called, “Airing your dirty laundry in public.”

The fourth and final step seems to be pretty drastic. The person deemed to be the disagreeing party by the community as a whole, is to be expelled from the community. At least that is the way I read it. Jesus said, “If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Now, I expect his disciples would have understood this analogy right away. Gentiles and tax collectors would have been about as much of an outsider in that culture one could be.

However, I find this to be a little confusing. Consider that Jesus has gone out of his way to be inclusive to outsiders. He frequently went outside the normal cultural boundary in treating the Samaritan and Canaanite women that he healed and the fact that he choose Matthew, a tax collector, to be one of his disciples. I guess he is just using these examples because they would have been understood.

The Gospel today reminds us of the good we can do together and provides a framework on how to do it. And, remember, while we are making momentous decisions, Jesus is with us.

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” He is with us, to guide us.

Let us end with this prayer I found for Forgiveness.

Merciful Father, I seek your abundant grace and mercy. But first, I confess the burdens of unforgiveness that weigh heavy on my heart, both for those who have wronged me and for the mistakes I have made.

Please strengthen me to forgive others as you have forgiven me, so I can gain release from the chains that bind me.

Also help me to extend the same compassion and understanding to myself, accepting your forgiveness and letting go of guilt and self condemnation.

Amen