

Proper 18, Pentecost 15, Year A (RCL)
September 10, 2023
New Song Episcopal
Jane Stewart

Ezekiel 33:7-11
Psalm 119:33-40
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

What Really Matters

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But 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. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

That seems clear. It’s a nice, tidy little formula for dealing with conflict in the church. Try to resolve it one-on-one. If that doesn’t work, try an intervention, bringing a couple of people in with you to try to resolve the conflict quietly. If that still doesn’t work, bring in the entire congregation. And if even that doesn’t work, know that you’ve done your best, and let it go, along with the offender. Wash your hands. Your work is done.

. . . Or is it?

This little passage of Matthew falls immediately on the heels of Jesus’ parable about the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine sheep to their own devices as the shepherd goes and searches for the one that has strayed from the sheepfold. The last verse before today’s lectionary reading is “So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones

should be lost.” Neither should it be our will. Relationships are worth whatever effort it takes on our part to nurture and sustain them.

In the verses just after today’s passage, Peter asks Jesus a follow-up question. “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” In other words, “No need to keep count, Peter. Just keep forgiving.” Does that help us see the tidy formula for conflict resolution found in the preceding verses any differently? I think it does.

Maybe it is not just a legalistic template for church discipline to be followed before we can feel comfortable giving up on the offender, but rather a sincere effort to “regain a brother” and to heal a fractured relationship.

Now, I realize that “regain a brother” doesn’t sound very inclusive. The NRSV text we have in front of us, in an effort to make it for palatable to modern ears, changes the Greek from “If a brother sins against you” to “If a member of the church sins against you.” But in translating it to sound more inclusive, I think that the NRSV may lose the key ingredient to the passage, which is relationship. This isn’t just some random member of a group to which we both happen to belong – this is someone I’m in relationship with – someone I care about – someone God cares about.

In today’s passage from Ezekiel, which also speaks of the need to bring about reconciliation, God tells Ezekiel, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live.”

All that we know about God teaches us that God longs to be in relationship with us. God does not want to be a God far off, but a God intimately connected to us. God created us for relationship, both with God and with one another. Time and again, through the stories told in the Hebrew scriptures, God calls the people back into relationship, despite their sins, shortcomings, and disobedience. God gives the people judges and kings to guide them and prophets to set them back on the right path when they, like that 100th sheep, wander away from God's ways. As Christians, we see the ultimate sign of God's self-giving love for us in God's gift of Jesus, to be Emanuel. God with us. God for us.

As we will hear in a few moments in the Eucharistic Prayer, "Through Jesus Christ our Redeemer, you have freed us from sin, brought us into your life, reconciled us to you, and restored us to the glory you intend for us."ⁱ

God continues to go to great lengths to restore that glory – to heal what is broken in us and between us and to build a community where Christ's presence continues to bring forgiveness, healing, and joy.

People will always have conflicts. Churches will always have conflicts. It is how we handle them that matters.

We are no strangers to conflict here at New Song. In fact, there was a time when I wondered if we could survive the deep hurts that threatened to divide us. But by God's grace, we're still here and we've emerged as a healthy congregation besides. Being healthy means that we can, once again, offer a place of refuge, love, welcome, and healing to all who seek God here.

Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." That verse is a reminder to us that what we say and do together is always said and done in Jesus' presence. And it is a promise that the hard, intentional work we do that helps us remain in relationship to God and to one another is not done alone, but always with Jesus' presence and guidance.

There is nothing easy about fostering healthy relationships, especially when they are already strained, but it is what Christ asks of us – it is, as Paul tells us in Romans, the debt of love we owe one another – a love which can transform us both individually and as a community.

Before you leave today, look around and try to think of each person you see as a precious gift that God has given, so that together we can become the people and the community God wants and needs us to be.

There is so much pain and suffering in our world – sicknesses of body, mind and spirit, inequity, injustice, hate that comes from fear – these are all signs that the world desperately needs us to be the Body of Christ. There is also pain in the lives of those gathered here – much of which we will never know, and even if we knew, could never fully understand. It is good to remember that pain is an inevitable part of every life. I pray that that knowledge will lead me and all of us to treat one another with love and kindness, so that we can also be the Body of Christ with and for one another.

I'll close with a short poem-prayer by Wendell Berry from his book of poetry called *Leavings*:

"I know that I have life
only insofar as I have love.

I have no love
except it come from Thee.

Help me, please, to carry
this candle against the wind."

ⁱ Enriching our Worship, Eucharistic Prayer III.