

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
6 September 2020

Matthew 18: 15-20

Three years ago, my family and I had the honor of ministering for a whole summer in a small Church of Ireland congregation in the beautiful town of Killorglin, County Kerry. Today, I have an excellent story to tell you about that small congregation, so let me give you a bit of context. As you all know, the history of Christianity in Ireland has been marked by centuries of conflicts between Protestants and Roman Catholics. On the one hand, many Catholics still remember vividly the destruction caused by Oliver Cromwell in the 1600's. On the other hand, the Church of Ireland people still remember the pain of being the minority church for centuries, in a country that is still mostly Roman Catholic. There are many books and stories about the mistrust and outright hostility between these two groups and, of course, many of you remember the conflicts in Northern Ireland, which only ended in 1998. It is not an exaggeration to say that in many ways both Protestant and Catholic churches are visible reminders of centuries of pain and violence in the name of religion.

And, it is because of this history of violence between Catholics and Protestants that what happened in Killorglin a bit over 30 years ago is so remarkable. The congregation decided to sell their old church because it had been built on an incline and it was difficult for older people to walk up to it. The church also did not have a car park on the premises, and it was in need of costly restoration. With the money obtained in the sale, the church bought a beautiful piece of land near the local library on flat ground. The new space would allow for parking and easy access for all. The problem was that the returns from the sale would not be sufficient to build a church and parking lot without incurring major debt.

This is when the story becomes remarkable. At some point during the planning phase of the construction, the Roman Catholic Church began to fundraise for one of their many projects. Unbeknownst to the Church of Ireland congregation, the Catholics had been fundraising for them, and at some point contributed generously to the building of the Church of Ireland sanctuary. This incredible gesture created such spirit of gratitude and love in the Church and in the community that many began to see the Catholics as partners in ministry and friends. On the other hand, for Catholics, the new church was a symbol of unity and not a reminder of past grievances and pain. Suddenly, the church became a symbol of unity and love.

This great story is very appropriate when we discuss the gospel for today. We are in Matthew, Chapter 18, which is the fourth sermon Matthew adds to the gospel of Mark. As I have mentioned before, when writing his Gospel, Matthew uses about 90% of Mark and introduces 5 sections at various places when he felt Mark left something important out. Chapter 18 is all about life in community. It begins with a quarrel between the disciples about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus takes a small child and tells them, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of

heaven” (18:4). The disciples are to be humble and they are to make sure they don’t cause “little ones” to stumble. This expression, “Little one” covers the young, those new to the faith and to the church, and the disenfranchised. Jesus says, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” (18:6). After this, he describes the kind of concern the disciples are to have for these little ones. He tells them the story of the shepherd who leaves the 99 behind to search for the wayward lamb until he finds it. Later, he will give them a mandate to forgive without ceasing every time someone sins against them. He will drive this point home by telling them the story of the unforgiving servant, as we will hear next week. But, before he gives them that parable, he gives them the instructions we hear today. These have to do with the issue of church discipline.

He starts the section by saying, “If another member of the church sins against you...” So, from the start we know this is about conflict within the church. Jesus knew that the church, formed as it is by human beings, would eventually have to deal with internal divisions and conflict. I have a problem with this sentence’s translation, however. The original language uses *adelphoi*. “When brothers and sisters [in the faith] sin against you...” I like this better because it is drastically different to deal with an offense from a member of a church than to deal with an offense from a brother or a sister. When a member of the church offends you, many just switch church services, seat far a part from the offending member, and if it becomes overly uncomfortable, people switch churches. Few would challenge the fellow church members. It is just as easy to ignore them and avoid them.

When family offends you, it is not as easy to move out of town or to just stop talking to them. This was specially the case in small communities in First Century Palestine, where church members became as close, and even closer, than family. Sometimes your very survival depended on your family and extended relatives. You could not afford to be mad at them for two long. You needed to do all in your power to reconcile promptly. This was not just a mandate from Jesus himself, this was also a matter of practicality. We know that the early Christian communities encouraged their members to patronize Christian-owned businesses. So, in a very real way, your spiritual and financial survival depended on your church family.

In Christ, according to Matthew, we are all brothers and sisters. Not just acquaintances we see on Sundays. Truly brothers and sisters, and what happens to one affects the whole. We need to claim the original intent of the author and switch this translation from “If another member of the church sins against you...” to “If a brother or a sister in the faith sins against you...” Now, overlooking the translation problem, let us just talk about the process Jesus describes when there is conflict within the church.

First, you are to talk to the person on a one to one, confidential setting. Most conflicts would end then. If somehow, the conflict did not end, you were to bring two or three persons from the church. This requirements has Levitical roots. Jewish Law requires at least two witnesses before a person can be found guilty. The purpose of the witnesses,

however, is not to gang up against the accused, as we sometimes do in interventions with folks suffering from alcoholism or substance abuse.

The purpose was to listen to both parties impartially and try to mediate among the two, often arriving at a compromise. Sometimes the witnesses would side with the accused and convince the accuser about the errors of his perception, understanding, or facts. This is done to provide proper care to both sides. If this did not work, the case was to be brought to the whole church and if the accused failed to ask for forgiveness and perhaps engage in some form of restoration, that person is to be treated “as a Gentile and a tax collector.” In other words, the person would be expelled from the church.

This sounds very harsh, but in fact, once the church passed judgement, a great deal of pastoral care was provided to the guilty person. If willing, this person could enter a period of penance and spiritual work, which included meetings with a designated member of the church for prayer and counseling. After the process was completed, the sinner was reconciled to the church at the Easter Vigil when the sinner, dressed in white, would be welcome back into the church with the Catechumens who joined the church at the baptismal liturgy. At this point, there was great celebration and reconciliation.

My brothers and sisters, the unity of the church is very important and we all must do all we can to correct each other in ways that build our faith and strengths the bonds of affection between members. It saddens me when I see good Christians suing each other in civilian courts, sometimes without having a personal conversation with the other person. It also saddens me when we bottle things up, become bitter, and end up leaving the church. In the process Christ gives us there is ample opportunity for forgiveness, restoration, and love.

The work of the Church is the work of reconciliation. This is not the work of strangers, but the work of brothers and sisters who care for each other. The media tries to convince us that if our neighbor thinks differently than we do, they are the enemy and they must be treated like the enemy. It often amazes me how many Christians leave their congregations and denominations every year because of some minor offense another member caused them. Yet, they never take the time to speak to that person, hear him or her out, and give them an opportunity to apologize. Worst of all, they don't give themselves the opportunity to practice forgiveness. We give up prematurely because at heart we don't see our fellow church members as brothers and sisters. We don't have a personal stake in their happiness and their well-being. We answer Cain's question in our minds, “I am not my brother's keeper!”

We must remember that we are people with deep roots in the fertile soil of this church, people with a common history, who believe in a generous and gracious God who sent his Son into the world to reconcile the whole world to himself. We are our brothers and sisters keepers and the church is never fully herself unless there is space for all of us. Being a Christian doesn't require a political or ideological uniform or straitjacket. It is just not true that members of one political party or theological persuasion are inherently better Christians than members of another. If this were the case, the Divorce rate among some denominations

would be much less than the divorce rates for folks of a different denomination, which of course it is not! Catholics and Anglicans have just as many issues with divorce than Baptists and Pentecostals. I believe we fall victims of simplistic characterizations that make us rationalize our hatred. But, the truth of the matter is that there are no perfect churches and there are no perfect political parties. And, it is because of this that we can expect conflict among us. It is inevitable. But conflict can either make us the most loving, embracing, inclusive, and Christ-filled church in town, or it can make us the most dysfunctional system in Harris County. The choice is ours.

Today Christ invites us to talk to each other, rather than talking about each other. To resolve issues in love and not to repress them and harbor internal hatred for the other. Matthew ends this passage with a promise. Where two or three gather together to engage in the work of reconciliation, Jesus himself is among them. With his help and guidance, forgiveness and love are possible. We saw this in Killorglin where people chose to forgive historic hurts and grievances and join together in mission to build a church. This same type of forgiveness and reconciliation is possible among us. Do not let the political vitriol in the media and in the presidential campaigns convince you that you are surrounded by enemies. This is not true! We are surrounded by brothers and sisters. Broken, sinful, hope-filled, generous, creative, and at times grouchy brothers and sisters. But brothers and sisters nonetheless. Don't give up on your family!

May God continue to guide us into deeper love. Amen!