

Proper 18A: Matthew 18:15-20
Church of the Good Shepherd
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The Gift of Church Conflict

Back in my college days, I took a class on ethics where we were introduced to the great Greek philosopher, Aristotle and his book, "Nicomachean Ethics." The interesting thing about this book, one of the interesting things, is that a third of the book is devoted to discussing the virtue of friendship. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that Aristotle based his entire ethical philosophy on friendship. That may seem like a strange thing to base a system of ethics on, but for him, a good person is good as a result of being surrounded by good friends. It's not simply that how your friends act is bound to rub off on you. That's true. But more than that, it's that only a friend knows when to press you and when to hold back. Only a friend has the right to hurt you, because they can tell you the truth, and truth-telling can be painful. But having someone who will tell you the truth when you've messed up is critical to becoming a good person.

A few years ago, a colleague of mine taught his own course on ethics at the local college. At the beginning of the course, he laid a bit of Aristotle on them, told them, as I have been telling you, of the link that Aristotle makes between friendship and ethics. And over the rest of the semester, students presented case studies of some ethical dilemma in which they were involved. They had to tell what happened, how they responded, and then the group would analyze their response.

At the end of the semester, my colleague shared with the students what they had taught him during the course. He noted that, in their case studies, they often *avoided* responding to some situation in which a friend was engaging in self-destructive or hurtful behavior—a friend was dealing in drugs, or driving drunk, or cheating on an exam. Their primary justification for their lack of intervention, he observed, was, "He was my best friend. Who am I to judge?" "I was afraid if I said anything, she would get mad and never speak to me again," and so on.

My colleague concluded, "If that's how you view friendship, please, don't any of you be my best friend. I am too dependent on somebody who cares about me, who cares enough to say, 'Now that was not one of your better moments, was it?' or 'What the heck were you thinking...?' I frankly don't need any of you to aid my self-deceit. So, please, don't be my friend." He said this with some humor, I'm sure, but his point was anything but funny.

For my colleague was pointing to the fallacy, the insidiousness of our culture's *laissez faire* attitude towards misbehavior. Despite all the high-minded notions of tolerance and non-judgmentalism, too often, when we say things like, "Who am I to judge?" what we really mean is "I'll promise to stay out of your life, and stand by quietly as you plummet into oblivion, if you in turn promise to stay out of my life." It's as if we have replaced the "Golden Rule" – Do unto others as you would have them to do unto you – with a new rule: Don't do anything to or for others and, with luck, they will never do anything to or for you. This we call being "open," "tolerant," "accepting," or even "gracious," our not "judging" others. But really, it means: stay out of my life and I'll stay out of yours.

The thing is, such moral know-nothingism is not only the death of intellectual discourse and wise discernment, it's also the death of community. One of the defining characteristics of life today, particularly for those under 40, is loneliness, isolation, aloneness. It's perhaps precisely because of this that we have taken to using the word community so much today. We talk about the "motorcycle community," the "business community," the "environmentalist community," the "video gaming community"! Of course what passes for "community" today is fairly thin. These "communities" being more often than not little more than a collection of individuals who happen to share a common enthusiasm or interest, or perhaps a shared political agenda. But for there to be a true community, a community worthy of the name, for there to be a connection that's deep, a true friendship, there must be truthfulness, accountability, and, as risky and painful as it is, a willingness to confront each other. Judgment, you see, the assignment of right and wrong, the naming of real hurt, the telling of truth, can be an act of love. I love the truth enough to tell it. I love you enough to risk it.

And this is where the Church comes in. We believe that Jesus Christ has made possible what Aristotle only dreamed of—a new community based upon the truth. What makes Christianity so interesting is that, as Christians, we live our life with God in community, with other people, people who might call us on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with us. That's the function of the church, or at least one of its functions—to be a place where we can learn how to fight with each other...*with grace!* As the author of our gospel knows, the church is not all sweet thoughts, endlessly patient saints, and cloudless skies. Real churches have - or should have - conflicts. Now I'm not saying churches should be *conflicted*. I'm saying that conflicts are inevitable even in the church. This is due partly to the fact that people are still people, sinners, no matter how committed they are to God. We each have our individual faults and failings, which need to be confronted for the sake of the community. Church conflicts are also in part due to the fact that good people sometimes disagree about what following Jesus requires in a particular context. When two or three are gathered, there will be disagreements.

Now there are some Christians for whom that thought is deeply troubling. They think the church should be a place of a peace and serenity, where everyone gets along, where there's no fighting or disagreements. Well, we all know that just isn't so. Christians get into conflicts all the time, and sometimes they hurt each other. Judging by his remarks in today's gospel reading, Jesus accepts that this is how the church will be—churches will have conflicts, Christians will sin against each other. What marks the church is then not the absence of conflict, but rather the way we deal with the conflicts that inevitably arise.

So, what do we do with conflict, when someone wrongs us? Instead of ignoring it, or worse going around telling others, "Do you know what stupid jerk did to me?", Jesus tells us: "Go and talk to that 'stupid jerk' about the hurtful thing he has done." Well, maybe Jesus didn't use the words "stupid jerk" but he did say the first thing we should do is to go and talk to the person, lovingly pointing out their offense, telling them how they hurt us. Many times the wrong that we do toward others is unintentional. And yet, it is still painful. That needs to be acknowledged before healing can happen.

If the other person listens and acknowledges their fault, great! We are to forgive them, end of story. If, on the other hand, they refuse to listen, if they blow us off—which, you know, *does* happen— then we are *not* to dismiss the fault: “Oh, well. Guess that didn’t work. I guess that’s just the way they’re going to be.” No, we are to go back to them with another member of the church. That other person is there not as backup, to gang up on the one who sinned, but as a witness. Because, often when we have to face up to a third party, we are more likely to behave properly. We don’t want others to think us mean and uncaring. But, you know, sometimes even that doesn’t work, and ultimately the church, the congregation, is to get involved, to encourage reconciliation.

This all may seem like overkill to you. It’s certainly a lot easier to avoid the person and secretly resent them for the rest of our life. To Jesus, though, sin between believers is far too serious a matter to ignore. Contrary to our usual attitude, sin is not a private thing, something just between the sinner and God, or between the sinner and the one sinned against; it has consequences for everyone in the church. For, when we in the church ignore sin, deny it, sweep it under the rug, we’re not exhibiting “grace”; we are instead undermining our witness, our witness to the truth.

The church, you see, is to be a place of truth-telling—about God, about the world and about ourselves. In particular, the church teaches us to tell the truth about sin, our own and the sin of others’. And it gives us the resources we need to tell the truth to each other, and to hear the truth from one another, in order that the witness of the church might be maintained. When we turn a blind eye to one another’s sins, we are failing to live up to the truth. We are keeping the community from embodying the life of grace that we’ve been given through Jesus. This is why we in the church can’t simply ignore sins, can’t keep everything cheerful and superficial, and act as if nothing has happened. The world needs us to *be the church*, needs us to tell the truth, needs us to show a different way than the way the world deals with conflict. The world cannot on its own create communities where people care enough about each other to share the truth, to bring things out into the open for the whole community to see, and to practice forgiveness with one another. That’s what the church is about.

It’s significant, I think, that this is one of only two places in Matthew where Jesus uses the word “church.” By talking about the church here, in the context of dealing with sins among believers, it seems that Jesus is saying that what it means to be church is most evident, most real, when we exercise a gracious, restoring, yet uncompromising discipline.

Jesus makes this connection even more clear when he says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Did you catch that? God is not just to be found in sunsets and beaches, but in the nitty-gritty of working through of church conflicts. Jesus is present when we are gathered together to tell the truth to one another, to risk a deeper relationship, to seek repentance and to offer and receive forgiveness—*that’s* when Jesus is present. What a thought! How many Christians do you know can say, “Yeah, I see God when I have fight with a fellow parishioner or when someone calls me out when I’ve done wrong”? As odd as that sounds, that is exactly what Jesus is promising us. He is saying that he is present in the church when we seek to maintain its witness to the truth and to call to account those who refuse to live up to that standard.

It makes me sad to think of how many times Christians, churches, and whole denominations have declined Jesus' promise of his presence because they refuse to hold fellow Christians to account, believing that it's the "tolerant," "loving," "inclusive" thing to do. They don't understand that judgment, the acknowledgment of genuine injustice, the naming of real hurt, is not only the most honest, the most truthful thing to do, but it can also be an act of the deepest love. As the 20th-century martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in his book *Life Together*: "Nothing could be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to sin. Nothing could be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother from the path of sin."

I know something about this personally. I recall one time in high school when I was confronted about something hurtful that I had done to one of my classmates. After a meeting of the junior class student government, one of the other student reps confronted me about how I had rolled my eyes at something she had said in the meeting. She felt insulted and dismissed. I didn't remember ever rolling my eyes at her, but I can't say that I didn't. When she confronted me afterwards, I was frankly embarrassed. But rather than deny it or blow it off, I immediately apologized. And that was that. Nothing big. But even at the time I was impressed that she cared so much about me, and about our relationship, that she risked confronting me about it. She could have easily said nothing and let the offense fester in her, forever poisoning our relationship. But she didn't, and as a result, we remain friends to this day.

In our culture, we are expected to "live and let live." But, Jesus calls us instead to "love and let love." And sometime love means confronting others when they've done wrong, when they've hurt us. For that is the nature of true friendship, of true community, of the Church that Jesus has called us into, that we are a part of. Thanks be to God!