

The Matthew 18 Plan 17 Pentecost A

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” Romans 13:8

The server at the Hardees’ drive up window said to me, “Sir, would you like to super-size your order?” I can hardly eat the regular portion of food but it is nice to know in case I want two meals. Isn’t it nice to know that someone is looking out for your appetite? In our second lesson St Paul concerns himself with our appetite for loving one another.

It is a good feeling to know that people are looking out for one another. And these lessons in scripture today are among the most practical, positive instruction on how to live with another human being and promote the art of loving. It is effective for both Christians and non-Christians. It works for groups, churches, dioceses, corporations and even has been used to negotiate peace among nations.

The art of loving includes the art of dispute resolution. It was first mentioned in scripture in the book of Exodus. Moses was given guidance in this matter from his father-in-law, Jethro, a wise clan leader. Jethro advised him to appoint able elders to adjudicate minor differences between tribes and individuals while Moses concentrated on the heavy cases. It saved Moses a load of headaches and grief.

Disputes in the church have been a part of its fabric since the earliest days. Many denominations pride themselves in being like the early church in its simplicity of worship and polity. They talk of the great growth of the New Testament church. Yet when one reads how all things were held in common in the book of Acts chapter 2 (vs. 44), three chapters later (Acts chapter 5) there is a huge conflict about the stewardship of land donated by two of its members. Conflict is no stranger to God’s people.

The common name used to resolve disputes in both church and secular institutions is “mediation”. I saw how mediation worked firsthand when in a progressive Junior High School, my son Ben, was chosen to be trained as a mediator between students and he actually intervened in a few cases. This made me very proud of him; but most of all I realized later that in a society where some people will teach children to resolve differences with violence, children can learn a better way.

Jesus’ instruction in handling conflict between people has been available long before the church became an institution. Taking a closer look at this will bear fruit for any organization.

In his 3 step process of mediation, Jesus first said to go one on one: “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” This is a difficult starting point. How bold is the person to think that the other member is at fault! Jesus does not mince words or couch this first step

in a more pleasant manner. Yes, the potential for friction is enormous. Scripture teaches sin means simply the breaking of God's law. I think, Jesus implies that one had better be clear about the law that is broken by gathering the facts and then addressing the problem in private. At the very least, Jesus' command to "go" does say that one should not avoid the other person even if it shames them. I think this action for most members of a church is tough stuff. Yet, it needs to be done.

How can we speak the truth in love to a brother or sister? Might our approach be easier to think we are going to another family member rather than to a stranger or worse - an enemy? It's true, feeling love is tough in sensitive, tension-filled scenarios. Though we go alone, in private, we remember that the goal is not to confront but to restore the relationship with another person. God calls his people not to police behavior but to protect the welfare of His church. He calls the church to live out the forgiveness Jesus prayed for from the cross.

If this doesn't work, we are to go to step two: "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." No detail is given here as to how we choose witnesses. It would be fair to guess that Jesus did not have in mind asking witnesses biased in the plaintiff's favor. It would be like Moe, asking Larry and Curly to come and bear witness against a bad guy (whose side will they take?) Adding insult to injury is the last thing a Christian would want to do, especially if the goal is to regain a friendship or regain a brother or sister in Christ. Neither are we to ask someone else as a witness in order to seek their agreement or to choose sides.

This is hard work. I learned this when I took a week long training on Mediation Skills last month. The work gets hardest when the third step is invoked. We are to pray before each step that God would provide a solution in the first two steps. Yet if neutral witnesses are unable to convince the other party to seek resolution, then the matter is told to the church.

The upcoming workshop in October that Trinity will host for churches in this community, called "Entrusted with the Message of Reconciliation," will teach how to use these steps and form a mediation team within the church. This team will be the final step. If all else fails, Jesus instructs that the sinner is to be shunned and ostracized. This practice is seldom seen except perhaps by the Amish. However in the prayer book, the priest is expected to withhold the elements of communion from those who live a life unworthy of the body of Christ (*Disciplinary rubrics, BCP 409*).

A sister church in Pewaukee, St. Bartholomew, has never had to employ its mediation team. A peace covenant was written based on Matthew 18 (I have a copy of that here today) by leaders at St. Bart's as a "modus operandi." A service of reconciliation and a signing of the covenant was an invitation gladly received by most of its members. What that did was raise the anxiety of those who were bent on power

and control – and sadly, they left. The “Church Basement Ladies” play coined an appropriate phrase: “If you can’t take the heat get out of the kitchen.”

Contrary to the proverb, God’s ways are not always mysterious. However, getting Christians to behave as Christians can be an enigma. How can we gracefully alert somebody to the fact that their house is burning and something needs to be done? How should we, as the church, intervene when a dispute arises? Let’s not forget that God sent Jesus not to shame the world but to save it. Yet, at times, shame is not always a bad thing. Jesus himself endured the shame of the cross. Likewise, sometimes people have to feel shame before they can see the truth.

God is concerned about not only preserving the church’s integrity as his holy people, but about the rehabilitation and return of straying members of the community. Every church has some of those.

We should never be afraid to sound the alarm when we see irresponsible, disturbing and dangerous behavior. Church members are called by Christ to be whistle-blowers when necessary. We seek reconciliation and not retribution. This is the burden of true love. The responsibility to love in this way belongs to all of us. We owe it to one another and to our Lord Jesus Christ. And we can love this way with God’s help. Jesus promises that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (18:20). Our baptismal covenant asks, “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” Amen.