Pentecost 14 Proper 18

September 6, 2020

Matthew 18:15-20

Biblical scholars tell us that Matthew and Luke borrowed extensively from Mark’s Gospel as they wrote. Because each of the Evangelists had different audiences and different things they wanted people to understand about Jesus, they told their stories in different ways.

Immediately prior to today’s reading from Matthew is the parable of the lost sheep. Like Luke, Matthew places that parable in the midst of a discourse about reconciliation and forgiveness. For Matthew, however, it becomes part of Jesus’ teachings about the community’s role in the peaceful resolution of conflict.

The chapter begins with the disciples asking, “who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” In response, Jesus invites a child forward. This was a society built on honor and shame, where those who could help you gain honor were valued over those who couldn’t, where your status in society was dependent upon the honor of those you associated with and your role in the community. Children were valued for their labor and for the potential to one day add to a family’s honor. They most certainly were *not* considered the greatest for anything.

Yet Jesus says, “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever takes the humble position of a child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

And then he goes on to warn anyone who harms a child. “It would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”

He then tells the parable of the lost sheep – a man who owns 100 sheep who will stop at nothing to find one that wanders away, and then rejoice when it is found.

All this is the lead up for our text today. So, if Jesus has been speaking about his concern for those whom society deems unimportant and declares they are valued by God, and then begins to speak about wholeness for a community, reconciliation and forgiveness, we need to assume that Matthew expected us to connect the dots and form a deeper understanding of Jesus’ teachings.

While this passage may seem like a 3-step process for dealing with conflict in the church, it’s not quite that simple.

Jesus would have us remember that our relationships are precious. They are valuable. They’re not to be broken, cast aside, dismissed, or terminated lightly.

Conflict resolution is a challenge under the best of circumstances. For two parties who are willing to speak to and listen to each other, this text offers a reminder that we should attempt to resolve matters privately, so nobody is embarrassed publicly.

Given that a lot of conflict arises because two people don’t communicate effectively with each other, this step makes a lot of sense. But Jesus seems to assume it won’t always be enough, because he offers two more steps for resolving conflicts, for righting the wrong done to someone.

When conflict goes unresolved, it has the potential to affect the entire community. In theory, bringing in witnesses allows for multiple people to encourage the person who did something wrong to apologize, and it allows for more people to help the two reconcile peaceably. Sadly, it doesn’t always work like that.

Perhaps what we have here is not only providing us with a template for what to do the next time someone in the group hurts us, but also a reminder of our need to notice what’s going on around us.

After each step, Jesus says, “but if they refuse to listen.” If one person will not listen to another, bring in a couple witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, bring in yet more witnesses. And if they still refuse to listen, treat them as an outsider.

Not give up on them completely. Not ignore their very existence.

Remember, Jesus healed Gentiles and a tax collector became one of the 12 disciples. Remember, Jesus issued the Great Commission, to share the good news with *all* people. Being an outsider isn’t meant to be permanent, and it certainly doesn’t imply that God doesn’t love them or isn’t concerned about their well-being, or that we shouldn’t be either.

With this teaching, Jesus urges the community to “nurture honest dialogue and refuse to keep silent in the face of behavior that harms others.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

By placing a child in the midst of his followers, Jesus reminds us that those who are wronged do not always have the ability to speak up. They are not always listened to.

Conflict abounds not just when one person refuses to listen to another, when one group refuses to listen to another, but when one person or group becomes so accustomed to being the only voice that other voices cannot possibly be heard.

It is the community’s responsibility to listen, to demonstrate concern for those who lack a voice, those who are not listened to, to ensure that conflict is peacefully resolved. Just as the flock of sheep is not whole if one is missing, the community is not whole when anyone is missing, and peace cannot exist for all when conflict among some remains.

It should be clear to us that God values peace for all of creation, and that God’s peace is wholeness and justice, and all of creation flourishing. This text reminds us that we are invited into the peacemaking process.

In this time when we are unable to safely gather all of the community in one place, Jesus’ words, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,” can lead us to question what a community looks like in times such as these.

I’ve spent a lot of time pondering that these past 6 months. Along the way, I’ve been reminded that physical proximity does not always create a community. It takes intent and commitment to each other for there to be a community.

While we as the people of God continue to journey through these next several months, it is essential for us to remember that we are a community with a commitment to care about the well-being of each other. Even when we cannot be together physically, we are still a part of the body of Christ, and God is among us.

We trust that God is with us at all times, but we also trust that whenever 2 or 3 are gathered in Jesus’ name – in a shared physical space or on the phone or online – a sacred space is formed. Whether that space is used for worship, fellowship, or resolving a conflict, God is present among us.

May we be mindful of God’s continual presence among us and the ways we are called to work for peace for all of God’s creation.

1. Audrey West, *workingpreacher.org* for September 6, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)