

“Finding Grace in Conflict”
Matthew 18:15-20

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September 10, 2017

It was one of those church meetings that you would just as soon forget. There was disagreement over issues of how best to spend the church's money. Some wanted to spend it immediately while others thought it should be invested and only the interest should be spent. After a 45-minute discussion, the disagreement became personal attacks on each other. The meeting would not end well without intervention.

The moderator asked everyone to be quiet. He then led the group in prayer, asking for divine guidance to help with the current situation. The prayer refocused the group's attention. It was obvious that people were passionate about their church. Everyone calmed down and the meeting ended on a positive note.

The moderator asked to meet with two of the people the next day. He asked them to speak from the heart in an attempt to resolve the situation. Betty shared that she was hurt when Peter did not invite her to their family barbecue. Peter was surprised and explained that he did not invite her because he was grilling steaks, and knew that she was a vegetarian. Further, he explained that he was not trying to hurt her feelings by not inviting her. He was trying to be respectful. Peter said he was truly sorry. Betty said she was sorry for the way she acted at the meeting. The two left as friends.

Jesus knew that there would be times when believers wouldn't see eye to eye. During those situations, he directs us to meet with the person with the goal of reconciliation. If that attempt fails, the next step is to bring along a third person as an unbiased observer. Again, the hope is that whatever is creating the friction will be resolved. During such unfortunate occurrences, Jesus promises to be with us. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

I have mentioned to you before that I am trained as a conflict mediation specialist. As you can see from the above example, and it is true more often than not, the presenting problem in a conflict is not usually the real problem. In our opening story, the issue was not about how the church's money should be spent, but about Betty not being invited to Peter's BBQ party. It was so obvious, wasn't it? Why didn't the chairperson see that from the beginning?

When I am called in as the unbiased observer, I will start with the presenting problem, but I always keep in the back of my mind that the presenting problem is probably not the real problem. I listen for key phrases; I observe the interactions between the individuals or the groups involved; I analyze body language and vocal inflection; and, I try to interview each individual separately to get their angle of the story.

Once upon a time, there lived six blind men in a village. One day the villagers told them, "Hey, there is an elephant in the village today." They had no idea what an elephant is. Even so, they decided, "Even though we would not be able to see it, let us go and feel it anyway." All of them went to where the elephant stood. Each one of them touched the elephant.

- "Hey, the elephant is a pillar," said the first man who touched his leg.
- "Oh, no! It is like a rope," said the second man who touched the tail.

- "Oh, no! It is like a thick branch of a tree," said the third man who touched the trunk of the elephant.
- "It is like a big hand fan" said the fourth man who touched the ear of the elephant.
- "It is like a huge wall," said the fifth man who touched the side of the elephant.
- "It is like a solid pipe," Said the sixth man who touched the tusk of the elephant.

They began to argue about the elephant and every one of them insisted that he was right. It looked like they were getting agitated. A wise man was passing by and he saw this. He stopped and asked them, "What is the matter?" They said, "We cannot agree to what the elephant is like." Each one of them told what he thought the elephant was like. The wise man calmly explained to them, "All of you are right. The reason every one of you is telling it differently because each one of you touched the different part of the elephant. So, actually the elephant has all the features that you each described."

The moral of the story is that there is usually some truth to what someone says. Sometimes we can see that truth and sometimes not. Sometimes they may have a different perspective with which we disagree, because we didn't have the same experience, or we didn't see it from the same angle. So, the role of the unbiased consultant (the wise man) is to sort out the stories and try to put the pieces together in a logical configuration.

Jesus knew that human nature was such that people behaved in predictable patterns. He knew that a faith community behaved very much like an extended family. He knew that there would be conflict and disagreements, and he wanted his followers to always deal with those issues in a just, loving and compassionate manner.

Now, we should understand that what Jesus describes here is the most serious form of church discipline. Any punishment that involves the possible exclusion, or excommunication, from the faith community should be reserved for the unrepentance of serious sin.

However, as we were discussing this passage in our Wednesday night Bible study, Steve shared verse 17 from Petersen's *The Message* version of the Bible. This is what the second half of that verse had to say: "... If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love." And, once again, the same reading from the NRSV: "... 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."

Author and teacher, Dr. Howard Hendricks tells the story of a young man who strayed from the Lord but was finally brought back by the help of a friend who really loved him. When there was full repentance and restoration, Dr. Hendricks asked this Christian how it felt away from the Lord. The young man said it seemed like he was out at sea, in deep water, deep trouble, and all his friends were on the shore hurling biblical accusations at him about justice, penalty, and wrong. And then he said: “But, there was one Christian Brother who actually swam out to get me and would not let me go. I fought him, but he pushed aside my fighting, grasped me, put a life jacket around me, and took me to shore. By the grace of God, he was the reason I was restored. He would not let me go.”

Start from scratch. Try again. Don't let them go. Judgment and punishment vs. forgiveness and grace. What, exactly, is Jesus trying to say to us, here? You know that I like to dig deeper into Scripture, and try to discern new meanings that are not necessarily in the mainstream of biblical scholarship. What if Petersen was right? What if Jesus is saying to us, *"Treat the offender as I treat Gentile's and tax collector's—with forgiveness and grace. Continue to teach them - continue to nurture them—continue to love them. You may have to remove them from activities that might impact newly-developing disciples, but don't completely give up on them."*

In the work I have done at the presbytery level, I have been in positions where I have had to bring formal disciplinary charges against both pastors and ruling elders. When found guilty by the Permanent Judicial Commission of the presbytery, the punishment has always been less than the stripping of ordination or excommunication. Grace and forgiveness have always played a role in the discernment of appropriate punishment. In some cases, those who had been charged voluntarily gave up their ordination and left the church, but in my experience, they have never been punished so harshly by the presbytery.

Conflict isn't always bad. Healthy conflict can actually be a catalyst to needed change. Saul Alinsky, an author and community organizer, has said: “Change means movement. Movement means friction. Only in the frictionless vacuum of a nonexistent abstract world can movement or change occur without that abrasive friction of conflict.” Conflict isn't the enemy. How we respond to conflict, and how we let conflict affect us, is what often causes the damage.

Jesus gives us guidance in these matters, and if we interpret that guidance in terms of how we understand Jesus, Christian discipline should be filled with forgiveness, grace, compassion; and should always include the chance for reconciliation. AMEN.