

WPC
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Living Together As The Church
Psalm 149; Matthew 18:15-20

As I listen closely to our society, I've noticed something interesting: many people really seem to like Jesus. They admire his teaching and are inspired by his example. However, they can't stand Jesus' friends, the Church. They hold the spirit of Christ in esteem, but they're turned off by Christ's Body.

When you think about it, that's not a surprising insight. Yes, the Church is of God. And yet, the Church is also very much of humanity – ordinary men and women with weaknesses and flaws trying to get along together. The Apostle Paul called the Church “the body of Christ.” At the same time the Church is a “thoroughly human body with all the aches and pains and flaws of any human body.”¹

Jesus understood this paradox. Although he says some wonderful things about the Church, calling us “salt” for the world and “light” in the darkness, he doesn't smooth over or deny the problems that can often occur in the Church. In today's Gospel lesson Jesus doesn't say, “If you have disagreements in your church then it's not a true church.” Instead he says,

¹ William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Sept. 4, 2011, p. 42.

“There *will* be disagreements, there *will* be hurts and wrongs committed in the church, and when that happens you are to care enough about your sister or brother to act and try to make things right.”

“If another member of the church sins against you,” Jesus begins, and then he lays out a detailed process for dealing with these conflicts. Notice that the one sinned against, or in other words, the *victim*, is given the task of initiating the process. “Why do I have to take the first step? He did it, let him say he’s sorry!” we might protest. Perhaps Jesus wants to remind us that God’s grace and love was offered to us even though we sinned against him first.

Also, notice that the whole aim of the process is focused on the restoration of the offender, not revenge for the offended. It’s not simply to render judgment but to “regain” the brother or sister, to make the flock whole again.

A third point is that while the idea of reconciling with someone is challenging, the process that Jesus lays out protects both parties. In this process, “nobody is written off in haste, no one is fired on the spot, no one slams the door in another’s face in rage; to the contrary, a sea of energy is expended trying, time and again, to make peace. In contrast to the attitudes of the prevailing culture (‘If somebody hassles you, forget them. It’s their

problem, not yours’), relationships are of precious and enduring value in the church. When a relationship is broken, it’s worth going back over and over to work toward reconciliation.”²

But what happens if all of your efforts at reconciliation fail? Jesus acknowledges that the process may not work. The relationship may not be restored. If that’s the case, then you don’t go on pretending to have the relationship. So what happens when a person resists all efforts at reconciliation, who, as Tom Long says, “insists upon the quarantine of sin rather than the healing power of forgiveness? Then, a genuinely fearful thing happens; they get what they want.”³

“Let such a one,” said Jesus, “be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” In other words, a church member who does not want to be in fellowship with the rest of the church is granted that wish.

But this is a bit of a trick ending here. How many of us did a double take when we heard Jesus, of all people, say the words, “Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector?” As we look back on Matthew’s Gospel, we remember that it was Jesus who showed mercy to Gentiles (Matt. 8:5-13; 15:21-28) and who ate with tax collectors (Matt. 9:9-10). Matthew himself was a tax collector whom Jesus called to follow him.

² “Tom Long, Matthew, p. 210.

³ Long, p. 210.

So it's clear that even here, the ultimate goal is restoration and reconciliation. When all efforts to restore fail, the Church recognizes and acknowledges that fellowship is broken, and it does so by heavenly authority: "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven." In doing so, the Church is acting in the name of God, the God who, in Jesus Christ, is always seeking to restore sinners.

And so we return to the concept of the Church. I'll be the first to admit that the Church is far from perfect. I like the image of the Church as a hospital full of sick people. While I'll admit that the Church universal is not always as inspiring as the Lord of the church, it's the nature of Jesus to relate to us as a group. One of the curious things about the resurrection was not simply that Jesus, who was once dead, was now alive. The odd thing was where he went and what he did immediately after his resurrection.

The risen Christ didn't appear before the powerful leaders in charge of the empire, which would have been a good strategy if he had wanted to win the world through them. No, he was not only raised from the dead, but he returned to his motley crew of disciples. According to William Willimon, "Jesus not only came back from the dead but he came to the very ones who had so disappointed and betrayed him, that rag-tag group of buffoons who had so poorly understood and much less followed him in his earthly

ministry. Jesus rose to the church. To these half-understanding, fearful, disappointing disciples, Jesus breathed on them, empowered them with his Holy Spirit, and sent them out to do the work that he himself did.”⁴

The fact that we’re gathered here this morning is really a great miracle. We’re no different from the rest of humanity. We’re imperfect, messed-up, half-faithful, often focused on trivial issues, and yet we’re the form that Christ has chosen to reach out to the world. That’s why we don’t need to be perfect to come to the Lord’s Table; we simply need to be repentant. When we try to get along and make peace with each other, God’s light shines in the darkness. Amen.

⁴ Willimon, p. 44.