

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 14th Sunday After Pentecost, Sept. 10, 2017

Don't Tweet! Talk!
September 10, 2017

Matthew 18:15-20

Today is the first of three sermons on fairness.

When you were a child, if you had a sibling it was inevitable that disputes would arise. "His piece of pie is bigger than mine. No fair!" To solve that problem just let one child cut the pie and another child choose a piece first. I guarantee you that the pieces will be cut so equal in size that even with a micrometer you can't discern any difference. That kind of solution is easy but most disputes between individuals are not so easy to resolve.

Today people take to social media to voice their disputes or their personal differences of opinion. If such posts are clear and not offensive, even if people disagree with them, they generally are not a problem so long as people respect others opinions and their right to express them.

But that doesn't happen much of the time. People do respond to posts with which they disagree, often very forcefully. Profanity in such responses is common.

On Twitter in particular attacks are quite common and disputes rage. Why? It makes no sense. Social media is one sided. It is not a conversation but it should be. Instead of venting your frustration or anger with someone on-line, go to see them or call them to discuss whatever it is that is bothering you. Go with an open mind and be willing to listen to their opinion. You may not change their mind but you are unlikely to lose them as a friend.

In our scripture reading from Matthew, Jesus is telling us how to handle disputes within the church but what he is saying applies in all human interactions.

For the most part in scripture Jesus speaks indirectly via parables. He invites reflection and deep thinking, but that is not the case in today's scripture reading. He is very direct in telling us how to handle disagreements. He doesn't beat around the bush.

The context of Jesus' remarks is the church and a situation where one person sins against another. Within the church it is often hard to respond to actions of another member of the congregation. We are all family, almost literally in the case of this

congregation. We are all members of Christ's family and need to respond to each other accordingly.

Brian Erickson ⁽¹⁾ cited a situation at one church where the congregation was very intimidated by their elderly long time organist. They couldn't fire her so they threw a retirement party for her. That didn't work. She stayed. They didn't know what to do. She couldn't be convinced to retire so they gave the organ away. An effective solution to be sure but certainly not a Christ-like one.

What does Jesus suggest that we do in the case of conflicts? First he says to talk to the person involved, one-on-one. That simple approach often resolves disagreements and leaves a good taste in people's mouth.

This often works well in employer-employee relationships too. For a great many years I was the chief administrative officer of a large organization. In that position I would at times have to correct, or even discharge, an employee.

When that needed to be done I talked to the person concerned and explained what the problem was. In most cases, they understood and, if I had to discharge them, we parted as friends. Obviously that was not always the case but generally it was. I didn't just send a letter or email informing them that their services were no longer needed --- I talked to them face-to-face.

I can recall only one instance in more than 20 years where that approach did not work.

So Jesus says to talk to the person but, if they don't listen to you, don't get rid of the organ, take some others with you to talk to the person again --- have witnesses.

But what if you still run into a blank wall? What if the person still doesn't listen? Jesus says to make the problem known to the entire congregation.

Brian Erickson ⁽¹⁾ said, "We often forget that Jesus' wonderful declaration that he will be with two or three gathered in his name comes in the middle of a discourse about hard conversations and reconciliation. According to Jesus, the church ought to be reducing conflict through direct discussion, accountability, and transparency. When the church fails to live this out, when the church fails to invite Christ into our conflicts, we shouldn't be surprised when it's hard to see Jesus in our midst, no matter how many are gathered."

This advice applies equally well in family disagreements, in organizations to

which we belong, and wherever disagreements arise between people.

So don't give the organ away and certainly don't try to resolve disputes by tweeting or posting your anger on Facebook. Go and talk to the person or persons of concern. If that doesn't work, take someone else with you and try again. Follow the advice of Jesus.

If social media had been around 2000 years ago, can you picture the arguments which would have abounded between the Pharisees and Sadducees, the disciples of Jesus, the Roman authorities, and others? The vitriol and arguments probably would have been worse than one of our present day political campaigns and Christianity probably would not have survived.

Using social media to resolve disputes or hurt feelings is the total opposite of what Jesus taught us. In a public forum like social media all manner of people get involved who have absolutely no business being involved. Social media does not foster healthy communication. "Jesus taught us to go directly to the person who has hurt us and let them know that we have been hurt. Healing starts face-to face." (These Days, August 2, 2014)

Amen.

1. Brian Erickson in "A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series"
Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2016