

Over the past several weeks we have been reading through the gospel of Matthew. We have been following the lectionary readings which are the passages assigned to each Sunday of the year. Today we move into the 18th chapter of Matthew.

The 18th chapter includes several stories that Jesus tells in which he is focused on lifting up the least among them. The chapter begins with the disciples asking who is the greatest and Jesus responds to this question by stating that whoever welcomes a child welcomes him.

This chapter also includes Jesus telling a story about a shepherd losing one of his sheep. What shepherd who has 100 sheep and loses one will not go searching until that one is found. Again, the focus is on the least among them.

This now leads us to the passage which we will be reading this morning. Upon first glance what we will be reading will come across as a set of rules, and they are. But there is something deeper behind these rules. Much deeper.

Read Matthew 18:15-20

As many of you know Dear Abby is an advice column that appears in the daily newspaper. This week someone wrote in asking for advice about how to survive in their toxic work environment. This person writes:

“My job was nice when I started 12 years ago, and I enjoy helping people. I process payments for disabled people in a cubicle setting. However, my place of employment has become a backstabbing, uncaring, favoritism-oriented environment. I am well-paid and have good health insurance, so I need to stay. I am very sad each day going into work. It is affecting the way I interact with my children and my husband. Any ideas on how to get past the horrible day in the office so I can be at peace at home? -Dreading It.”

Dear Abby responds: “Dear Dreading: I do have a few suggestions. When it’s time to take your break, use it as an opportunity to escape the toxic environment. Put on headphones and listen to upbeat music, read a book or leave the office to eat lunch or have a snack. If possible, take a short walk or meditate and do breathing exercises to relax. Before you leave for home take a 15 minute walk. Take a vacation and replenish your spirit.”

There is nothing wrong with this response from Dear Abby. It’s good advice for self-care. But as I read this response I was struck by how this seems to be a different response than the one that Jesus gives in today’s passage. I can see Jesus receiving a similar letter or email from a member of the church that is mentioned in this reading from Matthew.

“Dear Jesus, My church is a toxic environment. I have attended here for 12 years. But now my church has become a backstabbing, uncaring, favoritism-oriented environment. I am well off and really don’t want to look for another church but this church just has lots of people in it that I don’t necessarily care for.” -Dreading It in Church

But rather than giving the type of advice that Dear Abby gives to avoid the conflict and find peaceful ways to distance yourself from those people, Jesus instead gives guidance about how to stay in community with them. Jesus says if someone offends you, seek them out and talk to them.

If they don’t listen then find a couple of others and go back to the person with whom you are having a conflict. If that still does not work and the person doesn’t want to listen to you then they can be asked to leave the church community. But even when someone leaves the community you are to still reach out to them over and over again and seek to welcome them back into the community.

What Jesus says here is not really about following a set of rules to solve a church conflict. What Jesus says here is that in order for the church to be the church then it must be a diverse gathering of people with different opinions who learn how to value one another and respect one another.

To truly be the church means getting away from a hierarchy where some are more important than others. To be the church means to affirm and live it out where all are included and where all are treated with respect. To be the church means to be a place where forgiveness and reconciliation is central. The world does not need the church to be conflict free. But the church must model for the world how to transform conflict into real peace and forgiveness.

Author Scott Peck wrote that communities navigate through 4 stages for them to become authentic communities. The first stage is pseudo-community. This is the most common stage and most communities never get beyond this stage.

In pseudo community, the community thinks that it is a strong community but it is not. The relationships never get below the surface. You ask someone how they are doing and they say "fine" even though they are going through extreme turbulence in their life. There are a lot of people in pseudo-community who are pretending to be something or feeling something that they are not. People living in pseudo-communities avoid conflict and they never share their pain with one another.

Jesus in what we read today guides his followers to create something much deeper than pseudo-community. Jesus wants his followers to learn how to love and forgive and reconcile with one another. Jesus expects there to be conflict but Jesus expects his followers to model how to move beyond conflict to forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace.

Allison Creek Presbyterian Church is becoming a much more diverse place. Diverse in many ways including where we come from, the color of our skin, the accents we speak, the way we vote, where we live, and how much we are paid for the work that we do. The leadership of this church has been very clear that our diversity is a strength.

But with diversity can come great conflict. We will not see eye-to eye with one another. We will at times become agitated with others and wish that others would see things our way. We begin to think that our experience of the world and the church is the most valid experience of the world and church.

But Jesus gives us some very clear advice. We are invited to grow deeper in our relationships by being open and honest but also being humble. We approach our relationships with one another with a spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness.

And even if someone leaves this fellowship then we continue to reach out and show compassion, love, and forgiveness even if we feel that they are at fault.

Notice that it is here that Jesus says the words which many of us quote whenever a small crowd shows up for a church event. The words, “where two or more are gathered I am there among them.” Jesus says these words not about a small church gathering but about a church working through their conflict.

Notice also that Jesus does not say where two or more agree then that is where he can be found. Jesus says it is where two or three are gathered. Gathered together with their differences among them.

Today we will be invited to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Holy Communion is a gift given to us to remind us of what true compassion, love, forgiveness, and reconciliation looks like.

As we partake today we are invited to reflect on our own relationships and how we can extend forgiveness and seek reconciliation.

Forgiveness and reconciliation is the model that Jesus taught of how a church should be.
AMEN.

+++++

-Phillips, Jannine, "Dear Abby," Sept. 8, 2017 in Rock Hill Herald

-Troxler, Jeremy, <https://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/jeremy-troxler-the-tie-binds>

-Given: September 10, 2017 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)