

Matthew 18:15-20

Let me give you a purely fictional story to demonstrate Jesus' method of accountability outlined in today's gospel lesson:

Mr. Jones, looking through the church's financial reporting system, thought that Mr. Adams, the financial secretary, was not documenting the books correctly, therefore it looked to Jones as though Adams was pocketing money. When Jones went to Adams and calmly said, "I don't understand your method of recording money transfers, it's not the same as the way I would record them. Can you explain to me how your method works?" Adams showed Jones his recording method, and after coming to an understanding he realized Adams was not pocketing money and his way of record keeping was easier, and more accurate than the procedure that Jones originally thought should be used. This calm conversation allowed the matter to be resolved quickly and quietly.

What would have happened if Mr. Jones had accused Mr. Adams of being a thief instead of calmly asking him to explain his way of documentation? It could possibly have ended well had Adams not reacted defensively and showed Jones his method and they would have come to an agreement. Or, Adams could have responded angrily, and an argument ensued with no resolution being reached; or Adams could have refused to respond to an angry accusation.

Then Jones could have gone to two other church members, possibly badmouthing Adams, and together they could have accused Adams of taking money. When Adams was confronted by these three colleagues in an accusatory fashion, he could have refused to speak with them. Not having his doubts cleared, Jones would have taken Adams in front of the entire congregation. Two things could have happened. Mr. Adams could have thrown up his hands in frustration and just walked out of the church never to be seen again, or Adams could have demonstrated his exemplary method of bookkeeping in front of the congregation, embarrassing Mr. Jones and causing hard feelings all the way around.

That is a totally fictional story created to make a point, the point being that we need to understand that what Jesus was detailing in today's gospel lesson is an ideal.

In a perfect world the way of problem solving outlined by Jesus will work. But we don't live in a perfect world. In today's society there are times when the person who has been sinned against cannot safely approach the one who has sinned without putting themselves in danger. Sadly, in today's society, even in some situations in a church, it would be nothing for a person who is being approached by another person to harm that person to keep them quiet. I'm sure you can think of some scenarios where this could be true.

What Jesus was trying to impress upon his disciples was the importance of relationships within the church. That is something that even today is of utmost importance. Relationships are the foundation of Jesus' ministry. Relationships are the foundation of the church.

An example of a good relationship is the very first scenario expressed in the fictional example where Mr. Jones calmly asked Mr. Adams to explain his bookkeeping practice and no one reacted defensively. Instead, Mr. Adams calmly responded to a friendly inquiry. My husband, Bill isn't here today, he is at a tropical fish show, but if he were he would assure you that this is something the two of us have been working on. And in case you wondered, he does know I'm telling you this. It used to be that we would read into what one of us was asking the other and react with a curt, defensive response, beginning a disagreement that could escalate very quickly. We have learned over the years that it is best to calmly respond to a question and then gently ask for details if we

believe there is more to the question than what was asked. In doing so our home has become a far more enjoyable place to live.

Building relationships takes time and patience. When a person is feeling out of sorts they may quickly respond with a sharp tongue. The third chapter of the book of James tells us that even though the tongue is a small part of our body it can induce great harm. And, yes, when someone speaks sharply to you it is easy to respond the same way, yet that increases the harm that is done. The better way is to softly ask if there is something bothering the person who is uncharacteristically sharp tongued. Then again, there are people, even in the church, who bully others, and by asking them anything you may end up being prey to their sharp tongue. The most important thing is not to react emotionally, but to deflect with humor, or simply walk away without showing emotion. In any case, do not allow them to get the upper hand.

I know of a situation where a woman, I'll call her Lilly, decided she was never going to help with a church project again because the woman who was in charge was a bully who had belittled her in the past. Someone convinced Lilly that they wanted her to be included in the group in the upcoming ham and cheese pretzel sale, and if the bully tried to force her to do something she didn't want to do, she had the right to ignore the person. Lilly decided to give it a try.

Lilly had been having trouble with her knees, and she knew she would need to sit to do anything. The bully assigned her the task of carrying sliced pretzel rolls into the other room where tables had been set up to assemble ham and cheese pretzel sandwiches. Lilly tried telling the bully she was not able to do this because of her knees, but the bully paid no attention to her, telling her to just do what she was told. Instead of carrying through this task and ending up in pain for days, Lilly went to the people who were sitting on stools slicing the pretzel rolls, explained to them why she couldn't perform the task of carrying the rolls into the other room all day, and asked them if any of them would be willing to take that task; otherwise Lilly explained she would need to leave. The pretzel slicers discussed the situation and determined that they could all take turns carrying rolls into the other room and no one would have to spend the entire time walking. Agreeing to this circumvented the bully and brought group cohesion and enjoyment, allowing Lilly to feel as though she was a valued part of the church group.

If you should witness someone being bullied, please have the courage to step in and calmly confront the bully, then walk away with the person who is being bullied, assuring them that there was no basis for what just happened to them. By doing so you will build relationship, and as Jesus was trying to explain, relationships are the glue that holds the church together.

Jesus brought the kingdom of heaven to earth giving us an example of a perfect world. However, Jesus was the only perfect person ever to live on this earth. Because of our humanity we sometimes fail when we are building relationships. Even Jesus had to work at relationships, and, through no fault of his own, some of them did not work. Relationships are not easy. Although it would be wonderful if we could always be at our best when interacting with others, the fact is we get grumpy, we get tired, we get frustrated, and with this comes the sharp tongue. Responding rather than reacting is the best way to deal with the situation when the person you are interacting with is not living their best life. It takes patience, practice, and prayer, not necessarily in this order. But when God is the focus of all your relationships the ones that are right for your situation will succeed.

All glory be to God.