

“Transformed in the Tension”
Matthew 18:15-20
Rev. Liz Kearny
Longview Presbyterian Church
September 6th, 2020

15 ‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; 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. 18Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’ This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

The Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor who founded a radically inclusive worshipping community called House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, Colorado, talks in one of her books about a quarterly welcome event held at her church in which they ask folx new to the community, “What drew you to HFASS?”¹ After plenty of sharing about how much folx love the singing, the inclusive community, the freedom to be themselves, Pastor Nadia

¹ *Pastrix : the cranky, beautiful faith of a sinner & saint*, Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, New York : Jericho Books, 2013.

always speaks last at these events with the same message. “This community will disappoint them,” she says. “It’s a matter of when, not if... We will let them down or I’ll say something stupid and hurt their feelings. I then invite them on this side of their inevitable disappointment to decide if they’ll stick around after it happens... Welcome to House for All Sinners and Saints,” she says again and again. “We will disappoint you.”

I think Jesus is doing something similar in our passage this morning. The Gospel writer is sharing these words of Jesus to a listening church community who has inevitably learned by now that being a part of the church, a community of humans, will mean that we will hurt each other sometimes. It’s a matter of when, not if. And so Jesus is concerned not so much with discussing whether or not hurt will happen, but rather *how* followers of Jesus are called to respond when that hurt occurs.

I’ve spent my life in various church communities, and in that time, I’ve seen many styles of conflict, with two particularly unhealthy styles that are on opposite ends of the spectrum - and I share these observations with you as a person who has participated myself in some unhealthy patterns of addressing conflict over the years. I also know that even talking about church conflicts brings up painful and tender memories and experiences of very real trauma for so many of us, and I would love to talk to you off-line if you want to process these experiences with a pastor. Don’t hesitate to reach out to me.

On one end of the conflict style spectrum is the passive aggressive, conflict-avoidant style, in which the truth about the injury never gets told to the person who offended, or it gets told to folks on the outside of the situation in the form of gossip, perhaps

dressed up as a “prayer request” or simply “venting”. Instead of the injured person speaking directly to the one who injured them, the straight line becomes a triangle, and all kinds of dysfunctional dynamics ensue. Sometimes there are good reasons for the injured party not to go directly to the one who injured them, as in cases of abuse where the injured person would not be safe if they were to do so. And again, for so many of us, there have been very good, healthy reasons to leave a church community that has a pattern of abuse, and I would love to have a private follow-up conversation with any of you who are longing to process those experiences. Those patterns of abuse, however, are not what I’m talking about here in Jesus words to address a conflict directly. I’m talking about a pattern of conflict that creates needless triangles to avoid an uncomfortable confrontation or honest conversation.

On the other end of the conflict spectrum is a type of confrontation that is less concerned with repairing a relationship and more concerned with proving oneself to be right, lashing out from the pain of the injury to humiliate the person who offended, sometimes publicly, to “cancel” them as we might say in today’s social media parlance.

But what Jesus provides for us in this passage is not so much a “one size fits all” manual for resolving conflict. In fact, if used legalistically in that way, the framework he provides could be easily abused to create even more hurt. Instead, Jesus provides us with some principles that can guide us in addressing conflicts within the body of Christ and beyond.

First, throughout this passage, we see that the end goal of addressing conflict in the body of Christ is to repair, to regain a

sibling, to welcome the offender back home. We see this impulse to bring the one who injures back into the community not once, twice, or three times, but actually four. To begin, the one injured is invited to go directly to the one who injured them in private to express their hurt and invite healing. At this point, there's no need for a public airing of the grievance, because again, the point is not to be right, but to repair and restore to the community. If the injurer still won't listen, get a few more people involved to try again. If they *still* won't listen, bring it to an even larger body to invite that person to turn around and come home. And though we may think at first that Jesus' command to "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector" means to exile that person from your community forever if the previous 3 attempts don't work, consider how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax-collectors throughout the Gospels. He kept inviting them in whenever he had the opportunity, scandalously sharing tables with them for dinner, calling them from their running away back to relationship over and over again. We hear echoes in this consistent reaching out of the verses leading up to this passage, where God, the shepherd, leaves the 99 sheep, risking everything for the one who was led astray. I thought of this earlier in the week as I listened to a live-streamed conversation between two Black lawyers and organizers in Seattle about what it looks like to move from a punitive "justice" system to one that is actually restorative.² Organizer Nikkita Oliver pointed out that, in our current punitive system, we address wrongdoing by separating those convicted of a crime from their entire support system and putting them in prison, instead of finding ways to address the underlying needs

² "Nightly Knowledge w/ Nikkita", from @kaisafit 's Instagram account, https://www.instagram.com/p/CEk_pJCJmcp/

that likely led to the crime in the first place (like hunger, a need for stable housing or a job, treatment of addiction, mental health issues, etc.) and restoring them to the very communities that are best equipped to walk alongside them to heal the hurt and find a healthy path forward. What would happen in our country if justice meant going after the one lost sheep and restoring that person to a community of support instead of separating them from that community for punishment?

The second principle just under the surface here is an unflinching commitment to truth-telling and truth-protecting, and without this principle, the movement to always repair relationship can easily be abused to cover up a multitude of sins. The injured party, Jesus says, is to go directly to the one who injured them in an attempt to repair the relationship, absolutely. But if the offender does not listen, there is no shrugging off of the harm, there is no telling the one who has been hurt “why don’t you just get over it?” Instead, the injured party brings in a few more people so that “every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses,” an action rooted in valuing and preserving the truth of the harm that has taken place so that the one who was injured is protected and the one who offended is called to change their ways. And if that gathering doesn’t lead to the injurer’s repentance, it goes before the whole church, bringing more folk into the conversation so that communal discernment can guard the truth and make sure the injury is not simply swept under the rug to fester. And if that still does not break through the offender’s walls of hostility, you’ll notice that that person, while not being exiled as an enemy, is let go. There’s an open invitation to come back, as Jesus did with tax collectors and Gentiles throughout the

Gospels, but there is also a protection of the one who has been injured, guarding the truth of what happened so that the one who did the injuring cannot simply move through other parts of the community to keep hurting people with no accountability.

This is not a commitment to truth that is bent on punishing the one who did wrong. It has nothing to do with humiliation or dominating another with your own rightness. This commitment to truth instead understands that unless the broken bone is painfully set right again, it will never truly heal, even threatening to infect the rest of the body. Truth-telling is about re-setting that broken bone, looking the harm that has been done squarely in the face and calling the injuring party to turn around, to change direction, to make things right.

It is this commitment to telling the truth that has been sorely missing in the white American church. So often, white Christians want to rush to reconciliation and friendship and connection with Black communities they have injured through our perpetuating of white supremacy in all its forms, from white churches participating in and defending slavery to protesting against the integration of schools to shouting “All Lives Matter” over the top of protesters proclaiming that “Black Lives Matter”. But the broken bone has never been re-set. Real, economic reparations have never been paid. There has never been a real attempt by the white church to face the Black lives and labor they have participated in murdering and stealing over the centuries. We hide in white fragility from truly and deeply hearing the truth of the harm we have done and we criticize the tones of Black organizers and protesters instead of lamenting our complicity and listening to the Spirit’s call to turn around with our investments of time, of money, of energy.

In this teaching of Jesus, the unwavering commitment to speaking and protecting the truth holds hands with the persistent love that always calls the lost home. These principles are in tension, but not in opposition. These words don't let any of us off the hook, and they also hold us in a paradox that has the capacity to transform by the power of the Holy Spirit, if we will let Her have Her way in our hearts. This way of Jesus tells us the truth, a truth that can set us free to find healing in the community that is the body of Christ.

Wherever you find yourself on this spectrum of addressing conflict today, whether it is in your personal relationships or on the macro-level we see unfolding across our nation, consider how the Spirit is challenging you to engage. Because it is worth it, friends. As Pastor Nadia says about newcomers to their church, "If they choose to leave when we don't meet their expectations, they won't get to see how the grace of God can come in and fill the holes left by our community's failure, and that's just too beautiful and too real to miss."³ And remember the promise at the end of this passage, that in the midst of the messiness of truth-telling and welcoming home, where 2 or 3 are gathered to do that hard work, there is Christ in their midst, with us always, making us new and making us whole. Amen.

³ *Patrix : the cranky, beautiful faith of a sinner & saint*, Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, New York : Jericho Books, 2013.