

Growing Together in Love

This morning's Gospel opens with Jesus at his most straightforward. No perplexing parables or opaque prophecies, just simple instructions on how to deal with conflict in the church. Matthew sandwiches this passage between the Parable of the Lost Sheep and Jesus's directive to Peter to forgive someone who sins against him as many as seventy-seven times. (Jesus clearly wants to keep his flock together.) Today's Gospel reminds me of the passage where the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray and he gives them the Lord's Prayer. Together, these passages suggest that Jesus wants to impress on his disciples the importance of right relationships. The Lord's Prayer is a firm foundation for a good relationship with God. The process Jesus describes here can strengthen relationships among God's people. Jesus knows that the disciples will be the ones to bring the church into being. He also knows that conflict will ensue. He wants to make sure the disciples know what to do when it does.

History has proven Jesus right. Christianity has been a hotbed of dissent from the very beginning. Peter and James, pillars of the original church in Jerusalem, locked horns more than once with Paul over Hebrew law and Gentile customs. The Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity transformed a radical movement of the poor and downtrodden into the official religion of the state; some critics claim the church never recovered. The Schism of 1054, when the Western pope and the Eastern Orthodox patriarch excommunicated each other over a disagreement about the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son, tore a rift in the church that has never been mended. During the Protestant Reformation, European critics of Roman corruption led what was supposed to be a temporary withdrawal from the Catholic Church; it became permanent. In England, blood literally ran in the streets when Henry VIII founded the Church of England, his first daughter, Mary, tried to restore Roman Catholicism

after Henry's death, and his second daughter, Elizabeth, restored the Anglican church after Mary died. More recently, the Episcopal Church tore itself in half over the ordination of our first openly gay bishop. The church has split over disagreements about doctrine and liturgy so often that, according to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, there are approximately 41,000 Christian denominations and organizations in the world today. Yes, we've had some conflict in the church.

That conflict isn't limited to big denominational movements. People tend to have strong opinions about how churches should function and can be remarkably quick to argue about the most insignificant things. I knew one minister who lamented that his vestry would pass his church's annual budget in five minutes flat, then spend the next two hours fighting viciously about what color to paint the nursery. Conflict arises in congregations, too.

That's where the rest of today's Gospel comes in. Even the greatest theologians aren't sure what Jesus means by, "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." It's probably not exactly what Jesus meant when he promised Peter the keys to the Kingdom, because Peter got special privileges. But it suggests that our broken relationships may not magically correct themselves the moment we cross from this world to the next. As Archbishop Rowan Williams has wondered, what if Jesus means that Peter will meet us at the pearly gates and say, "you can't come into Zion until you make friends with" the people you most dislike? Williams believes that building friendships is a priority, especially with those who aren't what he calls "natural cell mates." He asks whether we can pray and praise alongside those who don't necessarily share our views. Jesus, I suspect, insists that we must.

That leads us back to what the church is here for. Theologians disagree about that, too, perhaps because the church serves so many different purposes in the world and in our lives. The

church is a repository of theological history and scholarship. It can be a source of food, shelter, and hope for people in need. It can be a prophetic voice, speaking God's truth to powerful secular forces. It can be a showcase for the arts, a place for local community groups to meet, a spiritual home that welcomes those whom society too often turns away. The church is the body of Christ, an assembly of flawed, faithful people that is always bigger than the sum of its parts. It is the place where we gather together to study the Word of God, share in the Holy Eucharist and, most of all, to pray, praise, worship, and give thanks to the Lord our God.

The process Jesus describes is a textbook model for conflict resolution, but it only works as well as people let it. You can't have a private conversation, much less a conversation with two or three witnesses or the entire congregation present, with someone who won't talk to you. Even if you do, and if you're willing to participate humbly and patiently yourself, those conversations are unlikely to succeed if the offending person refuses to listen. In that case, Jesus says to treat that person like a "gentile and a tax collector." We can't take that as permission to banish the offender from our midst, though, because Jesus healed and fed gentiles and welcomed a tax collector into his inner circle. Apparently, our Lord expects us to welcome people to join us in worship and fellowship even when we might secretly prefer that they went somewhere else.

Jesus's conflict resolution process is elaborate enough that we're probably not supposed to use it to resolve minor disagreements, so we need to know the difference between a genuine crisis and a manufactured one. Having just a few hours to slaughter a lamb, paint its blood on your doorframe, roast it, and then eat it with your sandals on, your loins girded and your staff in hand before you burn the leftovers because God is about to pass through and strike down the firstborn of every household in the land? That's a crisis. A disagreement over a point of theology or bruised feelings over an unfortunate word spoken at coffee hour is not. The great English

mystic, Julien of Norwich, tells us that “God looks at human sinfulness and brokenness ‘with pity and not blame.’” It is not ours to place blame where God offers pity and grace.

The proliferation of Christian denominations means there are many different places for faithful people to worship. There are things said and done in other churches that are not to my taste, just as there are things to criticize about the Episcopal Church. For example, in this Creation Season, historically disadvantaged people who are suffering the most from climate change could give us a well-deserved earful. But Jesus affirms that he’s with any two or more who gather in his name. That means Jesus is with the people in those churches just as he is with us. It’s his job, not ours, to tell them what he wants them to hear. We have enough to do to make St. Luke’s a safe place for all kinds of people to gather. This church will probably never function exactly the way each and every last one of us thinks it always should, and that’s okay. What’s important is that it functions from a place of generosity, where differing opinions can peaceably co-exist and disagreements can be lovingly talked through with reconciliation, not the triumph of one at the expense of another, as our ultimate goal.

This morning, we come back together from our various summer adventures, and also from the differing circumstances and life experiences that have shaped us into the people we are today. Being together at St. Luke’s gives us the opportunity to grow together in faith, in hope, and especially in love, ever more becoming the people God intends us to be. There will be moments when we disagree, and conflicts will arise. But Christianity has been shaped in the crucible of conflict for centuries and, miraculously enough, it continues to thrive. When conflict occurs, may we listen to one another, may we be open to reconciliation, and may we be blessed to regain one another as brothers and sisters in love. *Amen.*