

Working Backward Through The Gospel

Matthew 18:15-20

One of the tools for reading a passage of scripture that I often find helpful is to look at it backwards. In other words interpret the passage starting at the end and working towards the beginning. What that often does is allow one to look at the whole passage in context. For it might not be until the end of the paragraph or thought that we group into a *reading* that we find the context out of which earlier words are spoken. I find that method particularly helpful in reading today's Gospel passage from Matthew.

I believe the context of these directions for how we engage one another in conflict – “*if another member of the church sins against you...*” – is spelled out for us in the last sentence of today's passage: “*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*” This gets to the heart of who we are. We gather in Christ's name. And Christ Jesus is in the very midst of us. He is the mystery at the very heart of our community. That is true whether the community is just 2 or 3 or all of us together, the whole assembly at worship, or the collective gathering of the wider Communion. When we are gathered in his name, Christ is in the midst of us.

Peter describes individual Christians as living stones built together into a spiritual house, built upon Christ Jesus as the sure foundation. Peter goes on to say:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.
(1 Peter 2:9-10)

The Apostle Paul says that collectively we form the *Body of Christ*. We are not called to be individuals but members one of another.

In fact our individual differences no longer define who we are. For in Christ we have become something else. In Galatians 3:28 Paul writes:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

When we risk relationships with people outside of our own gender, nationality, language, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status is precisely when we most show ourselves as Christians.

The overcoming of such differences is what distinguishes us from the world, which organizes around sameness. We are not free from each other; we are free in each other. In other words, we are most free when we bring in the collective wisdom and discernment of the whole diverse body of Christ together. (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, pg. 48, Jin S. Kim)

Jesus' presence in our midst is the sacred context that makes us more than a fraternal organization or a club or a team or a corporation. We state that identity as the heart of our parish mission: *St. John's is a wonderfully diverse community of faith rooted in the heart of downtown Stamford, where the Holy Spirit is leading us toward a new humanity in Christ.* That identity we share in one another as a community in Christ is the essential good news out of which we practice the challenging discipline of loving one another.

Working backward, Jesus has more to say about his Church. Whenever two of us agree (in prayer) he promises that our Father in heaven will act on it. Of course there is that awkward stipulation Jesus also taught us in the Lord's Prayer – *thy will be done.* A key part of what Jesus calls us to do as a community is to *agree* in prayer with what we are asking God to do.

Jesus also teaches us that he gives his disciples the authority to bind and loose. *Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.* This is a rabbinic phrase. A Rabbi would bind a law to a particular circumstance. Jesus did this in his teaching. *You have heard that it was said "love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you* (Mtt 5:43-44). Jesus binds the law to love our neighbor to apply also even to our enemies. He bound the law against murder to apply also to all acts of anger against one another (Mtt. 5:21-22). Jesus would also sometimes *loose* a law. He *loosed* the laws about obeying the Sabbath as not prohibitive against healing or against doing good. *The Sabbath was made for humankind not humankind for the Sabbath* (Mk 2:28) and declared himself *Lord of the Sabbath.* Because Jesus is in our midst and we are identified by his life and presence he gives us as his Church the same power to bind and loose.

Continuing to work backward through the Gospel, we next come to the harsh words in this Gospel passage: *"If the member refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."* Gentile and tax collector – boo hiss – those were generally despised and rejected by Jewish society. So to treat someone as a Gentile or tax collector would not be nice would it? Except, what was the profession of the author of this Gospel, Matthew? That's right – tax collector.

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. (Mtt 9:9)

Later that night as Jesus was eating at the home of Matthew along with tax collectors and other sinners who made themselves as Gentiles the Pharisees criticized Jesus for associating with such people. Jesus told them

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners. (Mtt 9:12-13)

If we treat people like tax collectors and gentile it should mean that we treat them with compassion and welcome. We should seek after such persons in love as Jesus did, just as Jesus sought sinners like you and me.

Working backward, at last we come to the first and central part of this passage – Jesus’ directions for how we engage one another in conflict.

Jesus said, “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. But 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. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.”

Within the context of this community made sacred by Jesus’ living presence in our midst, within the context of the summary of the law to *love our neighbor as ourselves*, Jesus challenges us when we have a problem, when we feel wronged, to have the courage to speak to one who offended us, to speak to that person in love.

This is not easy stuff! It is so much harder to talk *to* the person we are in conflict with directly and not speak *about* the person to others. We have all been guilty of that. But Jesus does not tell us to go to the elders or the Vestry or the Rector or your friends and *complain* about the person who wronged you, he tells us to go directly *in person* and *in private*. Being, as we proudly call ourselves in our mission statement, *a wonderfully diverse community of faith rooted in the heart of downtown Stamford*, we might find in that diversity of cultures that it is even harder to speak to the person directly. But that is how Jesus tells us to honor one another and honor his living presence in our midst. That is indeed the only way we can agree together in prayer. We are called to do the hard thing of going to the very person we may be most uncomfortable with and, in love, try and work out our differences.

Then, if that doesn’t resolve things, or the barriers to communication are too high, then we are called to bring one or two others along. “One or two others” are meant to be impartial witnesses, not ammunition to help us win our point. Then with three or four and Christ in our midst maybe we can listen to one another and better sort out our conflict and hurt.

Then and only then, if the sense of conflict and hurt continue, are we to bring the issue to the wider church: in our parish that would mean going through the clergy, wardens and Vestry. Jesus gives us a clear method to resolve our differences. Some parishes even put some form of this process into their bylaws.

Conflict can move so quickly from an issue to be resolved, to a contest of wills to be won, to us vs. them and take no prisoners. This is true even in the church and maybe especially in the church.

We need to remember not only that Christ Jesus is in our midst, but also that each and every person in the church is a living member of Jesus Christ. Jesus calls us to the hard work of treating one another as persons, not things, of speaking *to* persons and not *about* them. He calls us to *honor* one another as he is in our midst and we are *members* one of another. That is the context of this gospel and it is helpful to work backward through it.

Amen.