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Matthew 18:15-20; Romans 13:8-14; Psalm 133

GOAL ORIENTED

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.” Those words from our Psalm today are certainly very true. It is so much better when harmony exists in our communities. But the reality, as we know, is that harmony doesn’t usually last very long. As humans we will inevitably disagree, cause injury to one another, and have conflicts.

And because churches are filled with humans, they are not immune from conflict. There is nothing so ugly and so painful as a church fight. Maybe some of you have been part of church communities that have been divided by conflict and you know this reality first hand.

In the gospel lesson from Matthew today, Jesus acknowledges not only that conflict happens in our communities of faith but he also offers guidelines for how to manage that conflict. Jesus teaches his disciples that if someone has offended you in some way, first you go directly to that person and you try to talk with him or her about the problem. If that doesn’t work, you go get one or two other people to join you in confronting the offender. If that still doesn’t work, you bring the matter before the church community. And then if that still doesn’t work, then separation of the offender from the community may be necessary.

Now, I’ve heard of Christian communities that use this passage as a how-to manual for managing conflict. These are the steps for dealing with disagreements and they follow them rigidly. Some communities use this passage to justify shunning or excommunicating members.

I wonder, however, if we are missing the point if we try to replicate this exact formula for dealing with offenses and conflicts. Not every plan for working through the complexities of human relationships works in all times, in all cultures, in all places. Rather than focusing on the

exact details of Jesus' conflict resolution plan—how many people you take to confront the offender, and what steps you must take before proceeding to the next stage, and so forth--perhaps the greatest benefit to us from this passage comes from the very existence of such a plan, and then from looking at some of the broad features of that plan.

Jesus did not pretend that as Christians we would all get along and live in harmony all the time. That is sometimes the misconception we have when we encounter conflicts in our faith communities. We exclaim, "Oh come on! We're all Christians! Why can't we just get along?" But that isn't realistic. And often that kind of mind-set silences those who have legitimate grievances. So Jesus offers a method for his followers to deal with conflict and problems.

And there are a few features of this method that seem significant.

The first significant aspect of Jesus' plan is that when someone has a grievance against another, that person goes to the offender directly. Jesus' plan avoids what is called "triangulation." Triangulation is what we do when we go to a third person—the boss, a parent, the pastor, another church member--to get them to intervene or deal with the problem. Triangulation is not the same as seeking advice from another person or seeing a counselor. Rather, triangulation is when we want that third person to deal with the issue *instead* of us. Triangulation often gets messy and complicates the problem. But Jesus' sets forth a plan where the offended person voices his or her complaint directly to the one who has offended them. And that is not easy or comfortable. It is far easier to talk to other people about how badly another person who has wronged us than to deal with that person directly.

The other feature of Jesus' plan is that it involves a deep commitment toward working out the problem. The offended person does not just get to walk away from the relationship or sever ties with the community without first trying to work things out. Instead, as we see in

Jesus' plan, there is a repetitive effort to resolve the problem. The person tries, and then tries again in a different way, and then tries again in yet another way. Dealing with the problem involves a deep commitment and effort.

This is the part of the plan that we often find so hard. Often we would prefer to walk away from a relationship, or to leave a church in anger, or to sever ties with another person or community. We do this because we, understandably, don't like conflict. Or because we are terribly hurt by another and don't want to risk being hurt again. Or because we are just so mad we no longer want to work things out.

But Jesus' plan involves commitment and effort and repeated attempts to address a grievance. But why should we have to put in such effort with someone who has hurt us or wronged us? Why should we?

We do because of love. Love is why. The Apostle Paul writes in our reading from his letter to the Romans that all the other commandments we are told to follow by God—all those commandments about not stealing or killing or committing adultery—all those commandments are summed up in the single commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

When Paul talks of love he does not mean the warm emotion we feel. I'm glad that's not expected of us because it is hard to summon up that warm feeling toward someone who has hurt us in some way. The kind of love Paul means is the kind of love we saw Jesus live out in his life: a love rooted in a deep commitment toward other people and their welfare, a love rooted in grace and mercy toward people's faults and failings, a love that is a steadfast commitment toward others even when they are not always behaving nicely.

The goal of being part of a church is not that we have a community that is always living harmoniously together. Churches sometimes mistakenly think that we gather together in order to

enjoy one another. Don't get me wrong--harmony is always nice, but it is not our goal. Our goal as Christians in community is to practice Christ's love. And that is typically quite hard and challenging.

Love toward others is rooted in commitment. When people get married, they make a commitment to each other. When people join the church, they make a commitment to their church community. And even though people beyond our church walls don't always know it, we Christians are called by Jesus to have a commitment toward everyone. He tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves, to love our enemies, to welcome the stranger, to go the extra mile, to forgive, to feed the hungry and visit the imprisoned and clothe the naked. Christianity involves a love rooted in a commitment towards others. And that is why we do not easily walk away from our relationships.

There is another important feature in Jesus' plan for conflict resolution. And that feature includes the element of failure. Sometimes, even after all our best efforts, we will fail to work things out. Sometimes the marriage ends in divorce, or an angry church member walks away, or a conflicted denomination splits in two. These kinds of separations are always, always regrettable. But I am also grateful that Jesus allows for them to occur. He does not say to us, as some faith communities have proclaimed, that "the marriage must endure no matter what." He does not force us to remain in broken relationships. Jesus provides for the brokenness of the human condition and offers us his grace.

That is what we find here at the Table. We turn to this Table as those who are aware of our brokenness and our imperfections, as communities and individuals who realize we fail in the practice of love. We come here for Christ's to heal us, to forgive us, and to teach us again the ways of love. We come here to learn again how to make love our goal.