

Gospel reflections

Matthew 18:15-20

If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church, and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

"Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

"Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

Conflict? We wouldn't know what that is in Lutheran education would we! 😞

There are some days when we can be almost overwhelmed with the conflict that surrounds and involves us. We can start questioning foundational statements that say: The foundation of Lutheran education is the gospel of Jesus Christ (which) informs all learning and teaching, *all human relationships*, and all activities.

Really?!?!

Community life can be challenging. It is today as it was in Jesus' time. Matthew's message in Chapter 18, together with Chapter 19, is written with these communities in mind. While it seems like quite a challenging passage, please read the entire chapter 18 as it provides the context. The chapter begins with Jesus teaching about humility and that 'whoever humbles himself like a child will be the greatest...' and then we have the seeking of those that stray in the story of the lost sheep. It is followed with Jesus' teaching that we are to forgive not seven times but seventy times seven. Matthew's focus is on mission and is providing advice to the early Christian communities. What is clear, is that even among Jesus' followers there would be conflict. It was not a community in complete peace forever singing the Kumbayah equivalent of the time.

This passage provides us with some helpful strategies for conflict such as starting the process privately and in person, and then, if needed, bringing in others. The challenging passage is verse 17: "If the [sinning] 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." (NRSV) This seems a bit harsh! Consider the passage through the context of a community who seeks to find and bring back the lost... This is a community living the mission of Jesus that involved the inclusion of tax collectors, including one named Matthew. (9:10-13). It was a community that was extended to Gentiles and all nations (28:19). The Message has the following interpretation of verse 17 that may provide some further insights; *If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love.* Perhaps this isn't so much about community discipline and more about God's love for all.

Jesus goes on to talk about the power of agreement, saying that anything that is agreed upon by two on earth will be done for them by the Father in heaven. This is a promise and not where Jesus ends. Jesus goes on to say, "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." There is no suggestion that the two or three need to be in agreement. Jesus is present, really present, where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, not just where two or three agree in Jesus' name, but where two or three are gathered; presumably this includes the two who cannot listen to each other about a matter of conflict, and how to handle it. Even there, perhaps especially there, Jesus is present. (Karl Jacobsen)

What does this mean for us in Lutheran education communities? How does this passage also speak to us as leaders of these communities?

It is easy to be an expert at identifying the people causing trouble 'over there', to spot those with destructive habits, and condemning the ways they seek to destabilize our communities. Being open to noticing when we are engaged in these very same behaviours is another story. Sometimes our defensiveness and subjectivity can



keep us from seeing how much we might hurt others. So perhaps this passage can remind us that in community, the troublemakers at times can include each one of us.

This passage also helps us recognise that Jesus is not providing a blue print to arrest conflict in its tracks. Jesus is making more of a statement about communal values and an acknowledgment of both the frailty as well as the importance of communal discernment. Love requires that we address the inevitable conflicts that will arise among us. It is not enough to sweep them under the rug and allow them to fester. Unaddressed conflicts can render a community unable to function as God hopes. (Eric Barreto)

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we find Matthew pointing us again to the promise of Jesus to be with us, that his presence is real, when we are gathered in his name -- in times of agreement, and even conflict. Remember the focus of Matthew's gospel is revealing the long awaited real presence of God, in the child called Emmanuel, God With Us (1:23) and in the parting assurance that Jesus is with us always (28:20). Yes, communities are challenging but they are also vital and God's gift to us. They are also the very setting in which God is ever present and moving among us.

Blessings for your day,

Anne

Prayer

Lord of the all,
you call a broken people
around you:
in times of disagreement
teach us to listen,
loose us from prejudice
and bind us to your way
of forgiving grace;
through Jesus Christ, who stands at the heart of our gathering. Amen.

Other insights

To paraphrase Matthew's Jesus, do you have those around you who will tell you when they see parts of you slipping away? (Emily Townes). If you don't, you need to figure it out. What if this week you identify that person or persons that will tell you, in all truth, that you as you are being usurped by you as principal or director. That is, somehow your role as principal or director has pushed aside your reality as person. That you as you are being coopted by multi-tasking, by being everything to everyone, that you are spread too thin. That you as you are barely recognizable compared to the one whom God first saw, believed in, touched, and called. All of this will be hard to hear. In the words of Gloria Steinem, "The truth will set you free. But first, it will really piss you off." Jesus suggests we should also be the same truth for others. Not with judgment or fear or a sense of betrayal, but from a place of kindness and love.

The thing is, Jesus' observations about how to live as a community of faith are not just important for us, they are also at stake for God. What about how we live in community is a reflection of who God is, the character of God, what's important to God? This passage tells us the truth about the dynamics of living in community, but it also reveals the very nature of God. God cares about you but also how God needs you to be with others. God knows God's own autonomy, but somehow cannot seem to exist without loving us. God certainly maintains God's own self-determination but when God entered into relationship with us and then chose to be human, well then, God made a radical commitment to dependence and belonging.

There's no going back. Not for God. Not for us. (Karoline Lewis)

[Sacred space reflections](#)