

When things go wrong
Menno Mennonite Church
September 13, 2020

Purpose: To establish a precedent for conflict as part of discipleship, and what to do about it.

Message: Within the body, we hold forgiveness and discipline together, remembering the ways in which all that we do is part of who we say that we are.

Scripture: Matthew 18:15-22

Synopsis: One of the baptized lies we tell ourselves is that when we are within the Spirit, or gathered as the church, conflict should not or does not exist. Yet even a basic experience of church life will tell you that this is simply not true. Discipleship brings us alongside each other, yes, but sometimes in ways where conflict does inevitably result. So Matthew provides us with specific reflections on what it means to be a disciple. Far beyond the well cited “how to do church discipline” of verse 15-22, the whole chapter (and beyond—the whole sermon) speaks to life in the church, pairing discipline with forgiveness, seeking the lost and care for the vulnerable. How might we learn from these challenging instructions in bringing and underlying our life together?

Note: while I will be focusing on 15-22, I will be drawing from the whole “sermon” which I read as the whole of chapter 18.

Matthew 18:15-22

¹⁵“If a brother or sister 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 they refuse 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.”

²¹Then Peter came and said to him,
“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me,
how often should I forgive?
As many as seven times?”

²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven.

There is a singular feature of the long story of the church: there is little of it that is devoid of conflict, misdeed and fundamental disagreement. From the very beginning, we are told in Acts, there were decisions to be made, policies to be set, and people to fight about them. A couple years ago, my birth congregation celebrated 200 years of history moving from an Amish group to where they are today. Along the way there was plenty of stories to tell. Of building the first formalized meeting house, of getting kicked out of the conference for hiring a seminary trained pastor known, of all things, to wear a necktie and a wedding ring. On and on it goes—and that is just the organizational history. The personal history is far more complicated than even that. Menno's history—I still need to work through Tim's new draft—is equally rich with history and stories no doubt.

The church, the body of Christ, is a divine institution with a profoundly human characteristic. Somehow, we have gotten the impression that discipleship done properly is assured an absence of conflict, and the gathering around the purpose of shaping our lives toward that of the risen Lord should somehow be a uniformly harmonious affair. Even though we are to be the church without spot or wrinkle—as Paul implores—it seldom takes a lot of time to find the fabric of our lives strained and pulling at the seams. We know the stories of the conflicts. We have been there. We live in their shadows as they shape us no matter where we stand on the issue of the day. Our histories, however long or short are rift with conflict. So there is little doubt that this text is a relevant one, even if it isn't a well liked one.

Please understand that I don't come here out of the need to speak to a conflict per se with Menno this morning. But we have to assume that forgiveness on some level is always a topic of concern where two or three are gathered. While I do not excuse the general crankiness that can attend church going, neither do I wring my hands more than I must over the failings of the church. We get stuff wrong, and we have to get better; but that said we also must understand that this is going to happen because what we do here together is try to speak of what is most precious. We are going to get it wrong; we are going to hurt other people. That is the nature of relationship. And that is not going to change.

So we turn to the owner's manual as Jesus lays out his discipleship hand book in Matthew. Where there is conflict, there too is Matthew 18. So much so it has been given its own sort of cache as a thing within the church “applying the Matthew 18 process.” With our legalistic intentions, we apply the steps we find in this reading as something to be satisfied so we

can go on with the “treating them as if they were a Gentile or tax collector.” In the Anabaptist tradition has often meant shunning them and severing the relationship regardless of the cost, even within families. We keep this passage in our back pockets to be used in case of emergency and in the event something serious comes before the body. But we don’t sit with it as a basic guide for discipleship, living, or a metaphor for the kingdom itself.

As is so often the case and my pet peeve (in case you have yet to notice) is that this verse works so often in isolation from others elsewhere. In isolation to smash glass if you have to use the fire extinguisher sort of way, its fair enough. But I think there is more going on here than just that.

If you look at your bibles at this chapter, you will notice a whole bunch of red letters all over the place around this. It’s a conversation directly following the experience in Matthew of the Transfiguration, and the disciples are beginning to get nervous around Jesus and all his “die to be raised on the third day” illusions. But they can’t help put to start to arrange the furniture in the Kingdom God. So they begin fighting over who is best and most powerful and THAT launches this sermon (a conflict launching a conflict sermon). And here it goes from a warning not to place a stumbling block in front of those who would wish to believe, the troublesome advice about sinning body parts, the parable of the lost sheep, and THEN we get into the If someone sins against you. It is not until Peter’s specification of how many times to forgive that Jesus is interrupted. Its all one big sermon, and I think has a lot to do with not only what to do in case, but to explain the ways that relationships work in the kingdom in the first place.

The sermon doesn’t end there either—there is the famous quote of how many times to forgive (we can quibble over 77 or 70 times 7 as the translation supports both, but the point needs to shine through that the limit is not a set notion). He bolsters this emphasis with the parable of the unmerciful servant comparing the need to forgive and be forgiven as a universal need just to cap off the sermon.

Matthew 18 is about when things go wrong, that is for sure, but it is far more complicated than what we might even wish. When we look at the whole sermon, gone is the notion that there is anything easy or straight forward about following the rules of the church when conflict is involved. Of course; seek those who have hurt you, reason with them, bring others to reason with them, do all of that stuff, but do that in a world that is bathed with forgiveness and with a realistic assessment of yourself and your role as a disciple in the meantime. Even when you do

reach the end and have a breakdown of relationship, I suggest that the parable of the lost sheep comes into play here—seeking out the one that is lost and continuing to bring them back into relationship where ever possible. And of course, we are to always to bathe this all-in forgiveness, always. It's not often that we connect all of this into one coherent core; perhaps we are the poorer for not making this connection.

Which is precisely why we don't frequently read the text this way. Inasmuch as history is written by those who win the various arguments, we don't often get the notion of forgiveness interwoven into our "and that's the way things were" reportage of how the world works. Yet we know it to be absolutely essential for any relationship to work. As we sit in the midst of deeply divided country and world, I wonder what role forgiveness needs to play in our way forward? Who do we need to forgive in our lives in order to simply move on? I don't offer this as an easy panacea for what ails us. Forgiveness is a lot of things but easy is not one of them. Also, it must be mentioned here especially that rarely is it the end result of a process of fulfilling expectations or what have you. Some times; most of the time, it is a matter of finding the will in our own lives to simply forgive to release ourselves from the insanity of the cycles that bind us. Sometimes, forgiveness cannot be about whether the other is deserving, has reconciled, or made anything better. Sometimes we forgive and let go the work of resentment because we must in order to move on into the world as God would have us do. Forgiveness breaks the world as we know it and that is why it is so remarkable when we do see it.

I think the point that Jesus is trying to make is that the nature of the kingdom has at its core the work of reconciliation both because that is what God desires and because that is what our life demands of us to simply exist. Within the church, there has to be the understanding that each one has value beyond question. Seeking those who want to come and follow is a ceaseless endeavor. Jesus understands that the question of greatness is not one simply who is the best, most capable, or wielding of best power, but who is up to forgiving and being forgiven. This is the case when life is going well, it is that much more the case when things go wrong as they so often do.

We are not perfect. We are not as individuals, and even more so as the body of Christ. We don't always treat each other as we should. We are much more given to look for the easy out to satisfy the law—I have forgiven 7 times therefore I am done with you—then to continue to do the far harder work of walking together in good times and bad. Yet seeking

reconciliation and forgiveness in the way of being a disciple. We should be clear about that. As much as we would like to hide our faults, we know that we are far more challengingly called to the work of healing them. Matthew gives us highly practical advice here, yet we struggle to really know what to do with it because it is not how we are used to functioning. Anybody that follows together will hurt each other. We must always ask ourselves how we want to keep ourselves accountable to the disciples that we have set out to be.

There are these throw away words in the reception and baptism of new members that are possibly the most important commitments we make to one another: “Do you commit to give council and receive council within the body?” From the very first we are committing to each other in accountability. What might it be like if we took our commitments seriously within the context of the whole of Matthew 18, serving the best interests of the whole body? What would you like to see as a value being held up when you receive the advice of the church? How do we balance our problems, our promises, and the hope of Christ always with us?

There is much more here than can ever be wedged into any given sermon. As tempting as it is to simply say my discipleship is my business we know that we cannot do so. Because we are the body of Christ, and we are called to the difficult work of displaying Christ with us. We know so many of our stories of getting this wrong. I wonder, dare we imagine it differently?