

Rev. Kristie W. Finley
Sermon “When Two or Three are gathered”
September 6, 2020

Prayer for Illumination

Loving God, we pray that your Holy Spirit will strengthen us to be devoted to the teachings of your Word, that through it we may hear your voice and follow it into eternal life. Amen

Matthew 18:15-20

15 ‘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. 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 the 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. 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.’

The first three verses in this text are enough to frighten most of us away – to make us close the book and run. Between our abhorrence for confrontation and our individualist views of life, this teaching of Jesus is too hot to handle. It is terrifying today, in our polarized and highly politicalized environment to even consider attempting this risky work.

I wonder what it would look like if we all tried to live by the principle we hear of in Matthew 18:15? If we did not escalate the conflict, join in the gossip, hold onto hurts? Do we wonder why someone has been absent from church, and fill in the blank ourselves? How often do we sit in the pew Sunday morning fuming over the real or supposed hurts that the person sitting across from us has inflicted? It may not occur to us that these have any effect on the church, or that they are causing harm to the body of Christ. But, do those emotions exclude us from fully participating in worship? Do they keep us from coming again? The entire body is hurt when any of us are absent in this way. When one of the beloved is not fully present we are not whole. Are we so afraid to do what Jesus has instructed; which would be to go to that person and ask them why with love, not shame or accusation. We can use this first step to reach out, and at least learn the why, and to show that we care.

It's hard work. We have to stay focused and listen, we can't be distracted. We need to listen with a heart of Christ and not our own. To set aside what I want, to refrain from being at the ready to get my two cents in, to be able to listen. It requires us to remove our need for individual self-interest and self-preservation.

This reconciliation is the work of a Christian. In the sermon on the mount in the fifth chapter of Matthew we hear Jesus tell the crowds: ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift

there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

I used to hear this as if I had something against my brother or sister, not that my brother or sister has something against me. We are called to make the first move, to work for reconciliation always. Think of how miserable you feel when you are angry or upset with someone. It eats at you and distracts you. You have the ability to remove that from someone else’s life, to help them heal. To care for them. Conflict destroys both sides; you can reach out and change that.

I am not necessarily saying that you should give up your position on something, I’m saying that in the interest of unity and fellowship you can listen and see the others perspective. We can agree to disagree respectfully and not cause division, to stay in community.

Adult Faith Formation started us on the path for Courageous Conversations last year, and I pray we utilize this in the future.

While in New Jersey I went through conflict mediation training for the New Brunswick Presbytery. I have been trained in family and divorce mediation, so I thought this would just be more of the same. Once again, was I wrong! Mediation in a church community setting is very different. You don’t have just two sides. In the church there are multiple view-points. In our role play, I was given the part of a parishioner who had felt wronged. At the end of the day, I sat in the middle of the peace circle facing someone with the opposite perspective. With a room full of witnesses we each spoke about how we felt, and it surprised me that not only were the two of us in tears, but most of the other 45 participants. And this wasn’t even real. It felt real because we have all experienced the trauma of conflict.

The importance of holding this text that proceeds this – the shepherd who leaves his flock of 99 to find the one – and the one following; the need for radical forgiveness is vital. We see that all are valued, that leaving the 99 to retrieve the one, and the willingness to put one’s self out there to risk confrontation, and abundant forgiveness point us in the direction of Christ.

If we are offended it is better if we act like the shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep. Our ego and our pride are usually so wrapped up in the issue we come at it with a vengeance. Proving our point is usually much more important. Is this process about changing the mind of the other to ours, or is it about trying to understand? We can disagree and understand what the community needs, and work to bring healing and unity.

In conflict, the power dynamic can be overwhelming. How could one of the disenfranchised attempt to speak truth to power? The powerful are not afraid to tell them where they are wrong. I see the good shepherd gathering the lost sheep up in his arms and loving it, easing its struggle and fear. We to reconcile our differences, to understand our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, even when we disagree. Jesus calls us to do this together, first one to one and then with a witness or two if necessary.

In the text for today, the witnesses play more than one role. They are to protect the accused from an overly harsh accuser, and to make sure there has not been a misinterpretation by either party. Sometimes the hurt party is incorrect. Here I see witnesses as loving, silent, observers who care for both the accused and the accuser – not two friends of the accuser who

have no interest in the accused. They are not there to intimidate, but listen and to be calming influences.

It is for Christ's sake that we try to reconcile. We need to care for everyone, not a single person should be lost. That is what is meant when we are told that if they do not listen to the three, or the church, that they should be treated as Gentiles or tax collectors. Jesus loved tax collectors and gentiles! We are to keep our mission to reconciling bringing all into the fold, no one left behind.

In our fame-shame culture, we need to rekindle the loving conversations with actual people, not with our "friends on social media." This fame-shame culture of social media has caused us to circumvent the process that Jesus is instructing. In such a culture there is the ability to make everything public first before engaging with someone one on one. In this environment, we take sides and judge people we will never talk to or most times even know. Jesus starts small and moves out. We start big and often times never get the chance to reconcile. People are not given the opportunity to understand each other, we end up only listening to the people who agree with us. If we are seeking reconciliation, to be a whole people of God, it seems counter intuitive to first shame and push others away.

This can feel hopeless. How can we do this reconciling work that is so difficult and painful? We need to keep at the forefront of our thoughts the final verse of today's passage. Jesus tells us: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Jesus never invites us to engage in this difficult work alone. He is always with us. Will we open ourselves to feel his presence, to be listening with us and with the other? We have neighbors who will do this work with us also. Faith, patience, persistence and discernment are the tools we need most here.

What stories of do you hold? We hear about the stories of nations and conflict that have experienced reconciliation. But what about our own? The ones to which we are most connected. I had a close friend in high school who was empathetic and caring, but when my mother died she became distant. It was painful and I held on to that hurt. We graduated and went our separate ways. Then about 19 years later she called me, out of the blue, she was in Chicago and wanted to see me. I was not very excited about the prospect of seeing her after so many years, but she was insistent. What she had come to do was apologize for her behavior as a 17 year old. It had been on her mind for over 20 years, and she wanted to set things right. I have not seen her in years, but her desire to reconcile has stayed with me. There are many more I could share which I have experienced in the church, but that reconciling is done in confidentiality.

Last Sunday Jim Cochrane read a poem by Mary Oliver, *The Summer Day*. The end of that poem has been darting through my mind as I have been writing. At the end, Mary asks a question, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" This wild and precious life is a gift from God. A gift we are to use to the fullest. I think if we see our own life as precious, we will see the lives of others in the same light. See the opportunities to enrich the lives of everyone we meet. To diligently work to eradicate conflict with our neighbor. To reconcile with those we have hurt, and help others reconcile the hurt they have inflicted upon us. Will we strive to live with wild hopes of reconciliation, and to love the precious gift that is every child of God?