

Sermon by Bishop James S. Dunlop
Lower Susquehanna Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
September 6, 2020
Matthew 18:15-20

This Matthew text is one of the beautiful texts in scripture. It reveals the nature of our life in the Christian community; how it is that we are to live with one another. And unfortunately, I think, it too often is used as a club. It becomes the grounds for punishment, and in the church, the model for excommunication. Here is how you throw someone out of the community of faith. And yet that is not at all the purpose.

This passage points to life together, to life in community. Is this not the thing to which Jesus points? When this ends with the beautiful passage as Jesus says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Matthew 18:20 NRSV)

For those of us in the church, there is a parallel expression: where two or three are gathered in Christ’s name, there is conflict. I remember a story that my mentor, Pastor Stewart Hardy, shared with me from his first congregation. There were two more mature members of the congregational council. For the sake of this story, we will call them Hans and Otto, good Pennsylvania Dutch gentlemen, perhaps a bit set in their ways and a bit opinionated. They often seemed to be the ‘nay’ votes on new ideas in the congregation. However, there was one idea on which they did agree. They agreed that there needed to be a light in the parking lot of the church. Otto thought it was such a good idea that he was willing to fund the light. Hans was chair of the property committee and agreed to install it.

The problem was Otto thought that the light should be on a pole on the far side of the lot and Hans thought that it would be far easier to just put it on the building. Otto paid for the light, but Hans, as property chair, installed it on the building. Otto was furious that it was not installed properly on a pole. So, after a week or two, Otto hired some contractors, and they came and put in the pole and moved the light. Later, Hans came during the night and moved it back to the building. This went on for some time. Eventually, someone came to Pastor Hardy and said, “You need to step in.” Pastor Hardy observed that while they were moving the light around so many other things were moving forward in the congregation because Hans’ and Otto’s attention was completely on the light.

Where two or three are gathered, there is conflict. People who are outside of the church often criticize the church because of conflict and poor behavior by those of us in the church. The expression often heard is that church members are hypocritical. Yes, the church is full of sinners. And here is the thing, Jesus knew this. Why else do we have this teaching – a teaching on how to deal with sin, conflict, and brokenness in the church? The important thing is to hear what Jesus is saying about conflict and brokenness and how to deal with it. Not that there will never be conflict, but how in a loving Christian community do we deal with it?

The important thing to hear first is that Christianity is done in community and the community cares for the least, the lost, and the lonely. You know this from Jesus’ teaching immediately in front of this lesson. Jesus warns anyone who would cause an innocent child, in their vulnerability, to stumble they would be better off thrown into the sea with a millstone around their neck. Then the next teaching is about the 100 sheep and one of them is lost. The good shepherd goes off to find the one.

We live in a culture that places high value on the individual and individual freedom. We are grateful that Jesus watches out for each of us individually. Yet that is not how the story is often heard in places like Africa where community is valued above all else. They hear that story as the shepherd who is willing to risk their life to find the one and restore the community. Perhaps that is closer to what the early teaching of the church was about – the importance of community.

We often say things from an individual freedom perspective, “It is my life and I can do what I want;” “I am free, this is the land of the free.” But that is not what this lesson says. Our individual sins impact the community. Our being lost is a break in the community. It is a tear in the fabric of the community. Our choices impact the people around us, our family, our community. The commandments are about relationships with God and one another, most are about our relationship with one another.

Luther talked about our freedom eloquently when he said, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Freed by faith, which is a gift of God’s mercy, a dutiful servant to all because we live and care for our neighbor in community.

Jesus, here in Matthew’s gospel, gives us a clear process to resolve sin, brokenness, and conflict. The key is restorative justice. There are two kinds of justice: punitive justice and restorative justice. Punitive justice, you do something wrong and you are punished. That is the problem when this text is used as the way to throw someone out of the community. It is punishment.

But look how this passage is structured. If someone sins, you go and speak to them one-on-one privately, with the hope of restoring the relationship. To speak, and more importantly, to listen. To work to restore the relationship and the community.

I know that you will find this hard to believe that occasionally people call the bishop’s office to complain about their deacon or pastor. I listen carefully, and the first question I ask is, “Did you go and talk to your pastor or deacon?” Most times the answer is, “No.” By now they have complained to lots of other people. Generally, these complaints occur in what I call the parking lot meetings – the meeting after the meeting out in the parking lot of the church.

To go and have an honest conversation with someone one-on-one can be uncomfortable. Welcome to Christian community. If Jesus was willing to die on the cross, are we willing to have uncomfortable conversations for the sake of one another? If you are not, then you do not live in community but rather pseudo-community or false community, a community filled with empty smiles and fake niceness.

And what if the one does not accept your assessment of the situation, then you take one or two with you. I would not recommend taking only those who agree with you. Take people who are respected by you and the person with whom you have conflict. Be open to listening more than stating your case. It is possible that both of you can grow, and the community can be strengthened. Finally, these issues can be taken before the church, and the goal is always to restore what is broken, in quiet conversation, where the issues are not made public.

The last thing that this lesson points out is that we have a responsibility to the community. We have the responsibility to point out when one of us in the community has made an error. It is one of the things that I have appreciated in my role as bishop. People who come to me, in love, to point out when I have been wrong. How else will we become better if we do not have people who can honestly come and sit with us and point out the ways in which we have erred. It is the joy of working within the team of officers and staff of the synod – to live in genuine community with them to do the work to which we have been called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We have been in an interesting time with the pandemic. We have been unable to worship in person, to break bread together. We are hungering for the very thing that this lesson lifts up. We are hungering for community, to be together, to be the body of Christ, physically together. This time will pass. I do not know when, but we will gather again in community. And we know that whether that is hundreds of people together or just two or three, Christ is present. That is the good news Jesus has promised, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Jesus reminds us that we are going to have conflict. Jesus gives us the grace and freedom to care for one another. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, we too experience new life even in the brokenness and conflict that comes with living in community.

So, the question that I will leave with you today: when we come back to life in community after the pandemic, what kind of community will we want that to be? One in which we speak honestly with one another face-to-face for the sake of the whole community. Or one in which we speak about others because it is too uncomfortable to speak the truth and to be open to hear the truth about ourselves. Will we spend our energy on the color of the carpet, the color of the hymn book, or the position of the light in the parking lot or on becoming the beloved community of Christ?

The one thing I know for sure, Jesus will genuinely and vulnerably be there as he was on the cross. Will we do the same for the sake of one another?
Amen.