

Proper 18A New Song.

By the time Matthew wrote his Gospel – maybe fifty years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection – his church was already beginning to struggle with internal conflict. Lest we think there was some “golden age” of the church when everyone just “got along” and were always of one mind about things, today's Gospel should disabuse us of that notion.

Conflict arose on everything from exactly who Jesus was, to who could be part of the church, to how Christians should behave and live their lives in the world. And so, it was quite natural, given conflict like this, for those early Christians to ask themselves the same question we often do – “What would Jesus do in this situation?”

I think that's what Matthew was **trying** to do in today's Gospel reading (Matthew 18:15-20). He was trying to apply principles and actions he had seen or heard about in the life of Jesus to the struggles he was facing in his own church. So, he sets forth what we might call today one of the first examples of “church discipline,” even excommunication!

First of all, if a member of the church feels wronged (‘sinned against’) by a brother or a sister, they are not to ignore it indefinitely, but have the courage to confront the offender privately. It may be that it was some misunderstanding, or the person wasn't aware of the offense, or that the confrontation itself may lead to an apology and things can get back to normal.

If that doesn't work, the counsel is to bring along some witnesses so that the facts can be verified and the conflict won't devolve into a he said/he said or a she said/she said situation. If even that doesn't work, then the matter is to be brought to the attention of the whole community (adding a little public embarrassment as an incentive to deal with the problem!).

I think it's interesting that, in Matthew's church, there was not some hierarchical figure to take things to for an infallible ruling! There was no “Vatican decision” on excommunication. The whole community was involved in making the decision – presumably after a period of discernment and prayer which is why our passage today ends with the assurance of Christ's presence in their midst whenever “two

or three are gathered in his name” and are seeking consensus and a common mind.

But even after all that, if the offender won’t listen even to the whole community, he or she might face “excommunication” (which, in those days, did not simply mean being denied Holy Communion, but being cut off from participation in the life of the church). [Pause]

At the risk of being brought up on charges for heresy, I have to say that I believe it might be in including this last section that Matthew’s memory – or more likely the situation he was facing in his own church community – may have failed the test of “what Jesus would do!”

I could certainly envision Jesus counseling confrontation with another person he might see as an adversary. He stood in the long line of Hebrew prophets (like the sentinel Ezekiel today) who were masters at doing that! Indeed, Jesus did it many times with Pharisees and Sadducees and even with his closest friends – he confronted Peter more than once! And, I can imagine him thinking it wise to take two or three witnesses along sometimes; in better times, James and John and even Peter were often with him in such conflict situations.

But in Jesus’ day, there was no “church” as we understand it, to take the matter to, should those measures fail. The concept of “church” (or *ecclesia*) developed later in the middle decades of the first century. We **see** that development in the Letters of St. Paul, but even in those instances, like in today’s Epistle, the guiding principle in church governance was **supposed to be** love:

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another,” Paul writes, “for the one who loves has fulfilled the law...Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” (Romans 13:8, 10)

It’s hard to see much love in publicly embarrassing a fellow Christian in the church community or excluding someone from the life of the church, treating them “as a Gentile or a tax collector.” (Though It must be said that Jesus even treated Gentiles and tax collectors with love and, far from excluding them from his community, he welcomed them. Remember how often he reached out to Gentiles! And remember that even Matthew was a tax collector!)

Unfortunately, the church throughout history has often not lived up to that standard in treating “the other,” or even members of the community, with love. Excommunication is a cruel step whether it means denying someone the Sacrament or excluding them from the life of the church. We Anglicans began our separate existence from Rome by being excommunicated. And there are countless members of the Episcopal Church who have found their way to us after the heartbreak, or at least the threat, of excommunication from another church.

Of course, every community, even family, has to have boundaries of some kind. In times of persecution – like perhaps Matthew’s church community was going through – sometimes those boundaries provide protection and a sense of identity when all else seems to be falling apart. But, as followers of Christ, we have to be very careful indeed in “enforcing” those boundaries.

Again, at the risk of heresy, I think we are perhaps better guided by the wisdom of an early 20th century poet, Edwin Markham, than by **even** the Gospel of Matthew this morning. In his familiar poem “Outwitted,” Markham writes this:

“**He** drew a circle that shut me out.

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle that took him IN!”

I think **that’s** what Jesus would do.

And why St. Paul’s counsel this morning is to “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law...Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law”.

Let us pray:

“Lord of the church, you call a broken people around your table: 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.

Discussion starters:

1. Is it troubling or comforting for you when you hear that New Testament scholars question whether everything attributed to Jesus in the Gospels was actually said by Jesus?
2. How do we find a balance, in the church or in society, between the need for “law and order,” discipline, and the command always to love and to forgive?