

14th Sunday after Pentecost, Sept 6, 2020

“Resolving Conflict in 3, not-so-easy, Steps”

Please pray with me,

Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer- the Holy three in one,

May your words be the ones I speak today. Let those who hear truly understand your call on our lives and understand what you’re asking of us through your message. Amen.

The Gospel reading of the Reformed Common Lectionary is Matthew 18:15-20, I am reading verses 15-17: Listen now for the Word of the Lord,

15 “If your sibling sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together. If they listen to you, then you’ve won over your sibling. **16** But if they won’t listen, take with you one or two others so that every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses. **17** But if they still won’t pay attention, report it to the church. If they won’t pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector.¹

((This is the Word of the Lord)) ((Thanks be to God))

This isn’t the sermon I wanted to write. I had looked at these texts a couple of weeks ago, and I figured it would be a fairly straight forward sermon. If it were on the cover of a magazine, it would say: “How to deal with conflict in the Church, in 3 easy steps!” Our lectionary texts this week are all about when conflict strikes the church when things aren’t so easy, and when the body of Christ is beginning to feel a little bit of chafing.

This isn’t a straight forward sermon this week. This is difficult. It has been difficult all week. It has been difficult all year. This conflict we’re feeling has been difficult since before the opening of this particular seminary. This has been difficult since the beginning of time.

Right now, our community, our school, hell, our country and our world, are going through a rough time. People are hurt. They have been hurt deeply by systems that have been set in place to protect them. People have been told they are invalid, and people have been traumatized again and again. It seems like at every turn there is another moment of systematic abuse, there is another argument, there is another trauma around the corner. This week has been no different.

While we can pretend that this passage is the one we will turn to when there is conflict in the church or in our ministry settings, that gets more and more tricky as the conflicts get bigger. And maybe, at this moment, you’re thinking of a time in your life when this passage has been used against you. When I was an intern at a camp in Kansas City, this passage was used against me when my supervisor had an issue with the way I’d talked to him. As I was sitting in what was

¹ Common English Bible

called a mediation, my supervisor, and our boss looked at me and quoted this scripture. Except there was a problem. The first step hadn't been followed. The first I heard of this conflict was when the second boss was calling me into a meeting with my supervisor. These steps are difficult to follow. There is hurt at every level, and if we attempt to fix every conflict with these steps, it seems like we would be in meetings forever, getting nowhere.

Fixing conflicts in the Church, or in our ministry settings doesn't happen in three easy steps. So where do we go from here? We may feel like this is all a bit too big for us. Every conflict of the church being boiled down into our ability to fix things... it may feel like our scriptures lend well to a mob mentality where we are right, and everyone else is wrong. The prophets knew we couldn't do this work alone, and that we weren't perfect. Scripture from our Prophets takes a different look at conflict within the Church.

The first reading of the Lectionary this week is Ezekiel 33:7-11, I am reading verses 7 to 9, listen now for the word of the Lord:

7 You, human one, I've made you a lookout for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear me speaking, you must give them warning from me. **8** If I pronounce a death sentence on wicked people, and you don't warn them to turn from their way, they will die in their guilt, but I will hold you responsible for their blood. **9** But suppose you do warn the wicked of their ways so that they might turn from them. If they don't turn from their ways, they will die in their guilt, but you will save your life.² ((This is the Word of the Lord)) ((Thanks be to God))

We as pastors are lookouts for the House of Israel, we are the ones who have been called to state the good and the bad within the body of Christ. When things are difficult, and when people within our ministry setting are hurting, they will look to us. We are the ones who must uphold the words that God is telling us. We are called to tell the wicked to turn their ways. And since there is never a ministry setting that happens in a vacuum, we must listen when we are called the wicked ones and examine our own ways, turn our own hearts as needed.

When reading for this sermon, I came across a comment from Margaret Odell, a Religion Professor at St. Olaf's College, she says: "Repentance, or turning, is an inherently hopeful idea, because it assumes that it is possible to change course, even after a long life of sin." I find this concept reassuring. We, humanity, must always have hope that things can change. This doesn't minimize that right now things suck, as we stand at the end of this semester, we are tired. We are waiting for this magical moment when things change. But overwhelmingly, we must have hope that things **will** change, they may get worse first, they may take weeks or months to change, but we must have hope that they will change for the better. The three steps of the Matthew passage may not work in every conflict, but we- as the leaders of the Church, can see that people need to be advocated for, we are called to see the good and the bad, as Ezekiel says, we have been called

² Common English Bible

to be lookouts for the house of Israel. God is working through us now, in this moment. God is working through us even in the worst of moments, and we need to act as the agents of change that we can have hope in.

Please pray with me,

God,

You call us to listen, to act, and to find common ground with those we lead. Help us see your path ahead of us, help us to find those we must speak to in these moments, and above all, help us to listen for your words as we move through our lives today and every day.

Amen.