

SERMON: For the Common Good  
TEXT: Matthew 18:15-20

9-6-2020

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

What a beautiful piece of scripture for the day when we come back together in our sanctuary for worship! Of course, as I have said all along, we have been connected and joined together by the Holy Spirit, even as we have been worshipping in different locations these past several months. Christ is among us, here in this place, or wherever you are joining us in worship. It is one of God’s greatest blessings to be the church together.

I tend to forget, though, that this lovely, encouraging verse is connected to a difficult passage about conflict in the church. Unfortunately, I think we all have at least heard of - if not experienced ourselves - how terribly cruel and hurtful some churches and church people can be.

Reading today’s passage from Matthew got me thinking about how the church used to excommunicate people from its membership for various sins or offenses. Out of curiosity, I googled *excommunication*, and found out that many churches still practice it in this day and age. Furthermore, they use this very

passage as their basis for doing so. My search revealed dozens of actual letters people have received from their church. Here are some examples.

One letter included these words: *Jesus himself tells the church to discipline those who refuse to repent of their sins and listen to him through the church. In obedience to his command, we are handing you over to Satan and his kingdom of darkness, in hopes that you will come to your senses, repent, and return. By this excommunication, we are declaring that you are no longer a Christian, and that you are no longer part of the company of the saved.*

Another letter indicates that the addressee has *denied the Biblical Christ by allowing [her] children to be raised by strangers in daycare and ignoring the God given roles and relationship of a wife for her husband.... Based on your unwillingness to deal with these sins, we are suspending you from the Table of the Lord.* Reading further, the letter refers to Jesus' teaching in John about the vine and the branches, stating, *a branch that does not produce godly fruit will be cut off.*

A third letter describes a service of worship in which the church *will formally declare that we can no longer consider you as a sister in Christ.* Beyond

removal from church membership, the letter specifies, *Far more importantly, we could no longer interact with you as if nothing is wrong. We could not, for instance, socialize in a casual manner, in a carefree business-as-usual manner.* And the final blow: *We would ask God to withdraw his comfort from you so that you would feel the distance between him and you. To that end, we would pray that life might become harder so that “your spirit would be saved on the day of the Lord.”*

Suddenly, the sentiment, “where two or three are gathered” has lost a good deal of its warmth.

One Bible scholar discussed how the internet fans the flames of human conflict. Indeed. It’s too easy to spew out our rantings through the keyboard without having to look anyone in the eye, and then not pay any attention to whomever might spew an opposite opinion right back.

He also emphasized that today’s lesson from Matthew not only encourages, but commands confrontation. “Harm cannot simply go unchallenged.”

“But Christians face yet another challenge,” he continued. “As confrontational behavior online runs rampant, the fear of confrontation persists within local church communities. Avoidance of confrontation is one of the most pervasive and predictable sins in modern Christianity. Somehow we’ve come to believe that words like *welcoming*, *inclusive*, *compassionate*, and *loving* exclude confronting people for the various ways their sins invite destruction to themselves, their families, and their communities.” (Michael J. Chan, *Opening the Door to Reconciliation*, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org) August 30, 2020)

Confrontation may come easily to us online, but it is a thousand times more difficult in person and face-to-face. The fear is real. Conflict and the thought of confrontation upsets our stomachs and makes our blood pressure rise. It monopolizes our thoughts. It causes us to lose sleep. It’s especially hard to be a good Christian when we’re tangled up in conflict.

In this passage from Matthew, we have Jesus himself teaching about how we should handle conflict and confrontation in the church. "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. But 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. If 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.”

It seems like a good process. And listening is key. In just three verses, the word **listen** (or a form of it) occurs four times.

But there’s a problem. Maybe a couple of problems. First of all, I think we need to be very careful about pointing out each others’ sins, especially without acknowledging our own sinful behavior. We’re already doing too much of that in our world, and it’s not helping. Second, it seems that the only one expected to listen is the one accused of sinning. Much more listening needs to be done by all parties. Furthermore, we need to listen for understanding, not for the purpose of crafting our response.

The next step, Jesus says, is if you can’t resolve the conflict one-on-one, take another person with you. In fact, it’s a good idea for each party to have another set of ears listening.

Also, Jesus isn't explicit about this here, but there's plenty of evidence elsewhere in scripture that he believed it was important that the goal of confrontation is always reconciliation. Like the passage that immediately precedes this one, where the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep to search for the lost one and bring him back to the fold.

The goal is *not* to win the argument - as we often desire - but to understand the other person, to repair and reconcile the relationship, and to restore the community, whether it be a congregation, a country, or a family. We know all too well how conflict between two individuals can upset the whole system. So, reconciliation is FOR THE COMMON GOOD.

We are better together. Working together. Playing together. Praying together. Caring for one another. Supporting each other. Challenging each other. And focusing on our common goals, rather than on choosing sides.

We are better when everyone comes to the table. All are invited to the table. The table of mediation and negotiation. The table of reconciliation and celebration. The table of the Lord.

Let us always remember that whenever we gather - whether for our daily bread or for difficult discussion - Christ is present, to nourish us, to strengthen us, to bind us together in his mercy and love. Wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, he is present.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.