

Matthew 18:15-20

At the beginning of each new school year, I often think about my years of working at colleges/universities. One of my first professional positions was as a Residence Hall Director. I worked with 7 Resident Assistants (or R.A.'s), and 250 students who lived in the residence hall I oversaw. While the position had many different responsibilities, one of them was serving as a mediator. Usually, a mediation was between two roommates, but it could be between floormates, or any persons under my care. The intent was typically to encourage the two persons to talk with each other and to work through their misunderstandings, disagreements, and/or conflicts.

For many incoming freshmen, living in a residence hall is the first time they will share a room with someone else. When they applied for housing, they completed a form in which they answered questions to help them be placed with a roommate. Some of the questions included: What time do you get up in the morning? What time do you go to bed? Do you smoke? Do you drink alcohol? Do you have a religious affiliation? And so on. These questions did help in placing them with a roommate. But, their responses to the questions did not guarantee that the two roommates would get along! In like fashion, just because we are all ELCA Lutherans, does not mean that we will all get along!

There were different types of conflict that required mediation (or in other words, a neutral party(ies) assisting two or more persons to resolve a problem). Their Resident Assistant would try to help them first. If they wouldn't meet or couldn't talk through their differences, I, or their R.A. and I, would step-in. This was part of the process. When the two could not work through their differences alone, we listened, and tried in non-judgmental ways to help them.

For example, Person "A" was upset with Person "B." But, instead of talking to each other, as our gospel passage for today encourages, "A" would talk to other people! "A" would complain about all kinds of things to other persons, while "B" often had little or no idea that there was a

problem! Instead of "A" talking directly to "B," gossiping with others became the medium for dealing with the problem. This was not helpful. It did very little, but to share the problem with persons who were not directly involved. It typically came to a head, when "B" saw others giving "B" strange looks, avoiding "B," or making snide comments to "B". The problem became even worse, when "B" heard about the problem from a person other than "A." "B" wondered how many other persons knew about this when "A" had never talked to "B" about it! "B" felt betrayed, hurt, and sometimes, very angry. "B" also wondered if "B" would ever be able to trust "A," or the other persons "A" had confided in, again.

Another type of conflict was what I called, "Incremental Frustrations." Person "A" was doing little things that irritated "B" on a regular basis. "B" said nothing to "A," because there was no big crisis. There was no big event to complain about. So, "B" said nothing to "A," until "B" got to a breaking point. It was like the adage, "The straw that broke the camel's back." Then, things fell apart. "B" would lash out verbally, and sometimes, physically, against "A." Instead of talking to each other early on, when both were calm, "B" waited until "B" lost control to really let "A" know what "A" had done that "B" disliked.

These examples are not unlike the conflicts that can occur in church assemblies. Rather than to talk with a person early on to try to resolve a misunderstanding, disagreement, or conflict, one person complains to other persons in the congregation or lets things fester. Rather than to follow the approach in our gospel passage, gossiping may ensue. When the person being talked about hears of it, they are hurt and may even decide to retaliate. As such, they too may start talking to other persons in the assembly, perhaps calling the other person names, mud-slinging, or using other negative behaviors to get church members to be "on their side." And the result is that the conflict does not get addressed in an appropriate way. The two parties do not talk to

each other rationally and work through their differences. They do not follow the process in our gospel passage today. They do not bring trusted persons in to mediate, if needed. Rather, they become more divided, and the assembly becomes more divided as members take sides. The sinful behavior of one or two persons, becomes the sinful behavior of many persons!

As we consider our gospel passage for today, it is very important to place it in context. Prior to today's pericope in Matthew 18:10-14, is the story of the lost sheep. We recall Jesus telling the parable about the one sheep out of the 100 sheep in the fold, that went astray. Rather than forgetting about that sheep and leaving it behind, the shepherd goes searching for the sheep. The shepherd leaves the 99 others, and goes looking for the one sheep. The shepherd searches until he finds the lost sheep, and when he does, he rejoices! Scripture states, "So it is not the will of your father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost" (vs. 14)

The parable speaks of the one sheep, the person who has sinned and gone astray being returned to the fold. It encourages us to remember that we might be the sheep who has gone astray! We are human beings. We are different one from another. We do not always do what God wants us to do. And we may wonder, "How will God respond to us when we sin and go astray? From this passage, we know that God will seek to bring us back to the fold, and God wants us as a church, to do the same. As we hear today in Matthew 18:15-16, "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!" (emphasis added).

Following our passage for today in Matthew 18:21-22, is another story of forgiveness and reconciliation. Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." The number "seventy-seven" is not to be taken literally, but rather,

speaks of one forgiving another an infinite number of times! This is the forgiveness that Jesus modeled for us. Jesus bore the sins of all humanity on the cross, so that we who believe in him would have forgiveness of sins and new life in him! Jesus encourages us to seek reconciliation one with another. We are to forgive not once, or even 7 times, but 77+ times!

Our gospel passage for today in Matthew 18:18 states, "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." What are we binding or loosening here on earth? Our pericope gives us a step-by-step approach for dealing with misunderstandings, disputes, and conflicts between two persons. But those involved need to be open and honest. The approach begins for those with differences, to first talk to each other, alone. No one else needs to be brought into the situation at that time. And yet, God is present with them! God is present whether those with differences meet one-to-one, with two or more neutral mediators, or with the whole church as God's process directs. We are reminded through each step, that God knows the truth about our interactions with each other. God wants us to deal fairly with each other. God wants all of us, the two persons, the mediators, and/or those in the assembly, to do helpful things to bring healing, forgiveness, and wholeness to the situation that is broken. When two persons work through their differences, reconciliation, forgiveness, and all of the other positive and helpful things that God desires for us, can happen.

May we bind our hearts together, as we seek to bring all the sheep that have gone astray back to the fold. May we remember that God is present with us wherever we may be, including when two or more are gathered in God's name. May we seek to encourage discussion one with another, and discourage divisiveness. May we ask God for forgiveness and seek reconciliation with those we have hurt. May we demonstrate God's love, grace, and peace, by lifting up all in our assembly. May we be God's faithful people, serving God and furthering God's kingdom here

and throughout the world. With God's help, all these things are possible. Thanks be to God.

Amen.