

If There Is a Conflict

Hespeler, September 6, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Ezekiel 33:7-11, Psalm 119:33-40, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

Some people might be troubled with the passage that we read from the Gospel of Matthew this morning. It begins with one little word that strikes fear into the heart of church leaders everywhere. It starts with the word *if*: **“If your brother or sister sins against you.”**

Why does that one little word scare us so? Because it means that something could happen. And what might happen is an argument, a fight or a conflict. It is saying that, in the church, people could do things to harm, frighten, insult or disrespect one another.

We Are Family

I mean, that shouldn't be possible, right? In the church, we are supposed to be a family. The words “brother or sister” are right there in the verse. And families are supposed to always love one another, not fight with one another.

Yeah, even as I say that, I realize how naïve that sounds. Families can actually be the very worst when it comes to arguing, fighting and disagreeing. They are particularly good at it because they know each other so well. They know exactly how to get under each other's skins, the words and responses that hurt most.

Families fight precisely because they care about each other. You might not bother to respond at all if some stranger does something foolish because you don't really care about them. But when it is someone in your family, you might not be able to stop yourself from fighting with them about their foolishness.

Yet even though we love to use that family language in the life of the church, we seem to expect that conflicts and disagreements should not arise in the life of the church. Leaders like me often seek to avoid it and prevent it as much as possible.

Conflict Is Part of Life

But, as the opening word in this passage should remind us, conflict is a part of the life of the church. In fact, if conflict is completely absent from the life of your church, it might be a sign that your church is not very healthy. It might mean that you don't care enough about each other or that you don't care much about the mission of the church to disagree.

And so, in our reading this morning, Jesus reminds us that conflict not only *might* arise in the life of the church, but is also likely an inevitable part of life in the church. Conflict, you see, is not in itself a bad thing. It will sometimes *feel* bad, but that does not mean that it *is* bad.

Handling Conflict Well

Now, when we manage conflict badly, there is no question that it can be very destructive. We have all heard horror stories of churches that tore



themselves apart over some disagreement or other, maybe even over some issue that didn't really matter. But that is precisely why this passage that we read this morning from the Gospel of Matthew is there.

If you want to learn how to make your way through conflict as well as possible, you will not easily find better advice than we have right here in this passage. And it is not just good advice for life in the church. The principles you find right here can apply to any area in your life where conflict might arise – in your family, among your friends or in your workplace. Jesus gives us useful advice on working through conflict wherever it might arise.

One to One

For example, the first piece of advice that Jesus gives is crucial. **“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.”** The damage that comes from ignoring this simple piece of advice can be enormous, and yet we are constantly tempted to do so.

I mean, put yourself in that situation. Someone has hurt you. They have acted in a way that you feel is insulting or disrespectful. Or maybe you just know from experience that their actions will lead to real problems down the road.

And so, you feel as if something needs to be said or done about the situation. But most of us don't relish the idea of being the one to do something. Most of us don't like dealing with conflict. And so what we often try to do is get somebody else to deal with it.

Dragging in Someone Else

In the church, that often means that you go to the minister or to some other leader and you tell them that they need to straighten this other person out.

But Jesus here says that, if the matter is between you and somebody else, you are the one who needs to try to deal with it first. When you drag somebody else into the matter, it might feel like you are doing the right thing, but it often leads to greater problems.

First of all, when you go to someone else first, you can easily make the whole situation worse. You have just aired somebody else's dirty laundry in front of a third party. And, even if you are completely righteous in the concerns that you raise, that can cause embarrassment and shame.

And sure, you might say that it is fine for them to feel like that, after all, they really did do something wrong. But embarrassment and shame are not emotions that generally help people to become better. In fact, they often provoke worse behaviour in some people. So, if you really want to help people to be better, you will find ways to engage them first in a more private way.

Exceptions

Now, there is an exception. In cases of abuse, harassment or even sexual abuse, going directly and privately to confront the offender is not the right course. If you do that, you are only putting yourself in a position where they can hurt you again and worse. In such cases, you need to go to the community first and the community needs to be courageous in dealing with the problem.

But in a healthy conflict where people are not at risk, conflict is a natural part of human relationship; you need to think carefully before you try to bring in a third party. You need to ask yourself if you are doing it as a power move, trying to leverage somebody's authority or position to

hurt the other person. Turning immediately to power or authority may get you a short-term fix, but I have found that it often creates long-term tensions and problems.

New Possibilities

When you go yourself first to attempt to resolve the issues, it opens up worlds of possibilities. You may leave that conversation with a better understanding and appreciation for each other. If you put in the work to understand why they behaved the way they did, you might help them find ways to express their worries, fears or concerns more constructively. If you skip the step of going to them one-to-one, that opportunity may be lost forever.

So, I believe that it is very important for us to learn from this teaching of Jesus and, as hard as it may be, to go and confront the person ourselves. I know that I myself have sometimes failed to do this. I know we all will fail sometimes. And I have always regretted it in the long term.

But we may face another danger as we deal with conflict. Jesus said that we need to start by dealing with a person directly whenever possible, but he also acknowledged that such intervention will not always be sufficient. And so, he reminded us that we are part of a community.

Neglecting the Community Role

There are people who tend to go too quickly to some third party and can make the situation worse. But there are also people on the other end of the spectrum. They think that it is up to them to fix everybody else's behaviour.

I think that we have a great example of that sort of person in our reading from Ezekiel this morning. In that passage we discover that Ezekiel has taken an enormous burden upon himself.

Ezekiel reports that God said this to him: **"You, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, 'O wicked ones, you shall surely die,' and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand."**

So, Ezekiel believed that God had appointed him to tell everybody else what they were doing wrong. And, if he failed to tell anybody, he would be held responsible for what they did. Now, I do not doubt that Ezekiel was receiving messages from God and that God was quite upset by what people were doing in his community.

Unhealthy Approach

But Ezekiel's approach of taking all of that on himself was not very healthy. If you read the book of Ezekiel, you will see that everybody hated Ezekiel and his constant criticisms did nothing to reform people's behaviour. Even worse, the constant burden that Ezekiel carried caused mental health problems for him. He suffered from constant depression and acted in compulsive and obsessive ways, like, for example, the time when he laid silently on his side in public for over a year!

I know Ezekiel was trying to do his best with the message he had received from God, and perhaps God had reasons for allowing him to carry that burden, but the point is that there are better ways and Jesus teaches us those better ways in the Gospel.

Sharing the Burden

So, while it is indeed best to start dealing with conflict directly by dealing with the offender yourself, that is not where it ends. When that fails – and it will sometimes fail because Jesus once again uses that ominous word *if*: **“if you are not listened to.”** – you do not need to carry the burden of your sibling in Christ’s failure as Ezekiel did.

Jesus goes on to talk about how to involve the community in careful steps, first calling on **“one or two others”** and then, as a final recourse, the whole church.

This releases you from the burden of dealing with someone else’s fault. But it also does more than that.

Not About Punishment

The point of it is not what we often assume. It is not about leveraging the community’s punitive power. That is how it has often been practiced through the centuries. Churches have punished people by shunning them, excommunicating them or making their lives miserable in some other way.

Excluding somebody might sometimes be necessary to protect the community, but punishment is never the goal. Punishment itself is one of the least effective ways of helping someone to reform their behaviour.

Healing Power

No, the most helpful way for the community to operate in times of conflict is in its extraordinary healing power. This is the secret power of any community, and it is especially the secret power of the church. Somehow, when the community comes together, it discovers powers of love, forgiveness and reconciliation that transcend the abilities of any individual member.

That is the truth that Jesus was pointing to when he said, **“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”** The context of that verse makes it clear that the presence of Jesus is primarily a healing and reconciling presence in the church.

Part of Healthy Life

Conflict is a part of life. If you in your personal life or we in our congregational life never experience conflict, it may not be because there is no conflict. We may just be avoiding necessary conflict. That is not a good strategy either.

I understand why we may want to avoid it, of course, but we do ourselves no good when we do. Learning to deal with conflict constructively is going to lead us to better outcomes both as individuals and as a congregation.

So, do your best in your dealings with the people in your life who sometimes cause you trouble. Talk with them directly when you can and come into that conversation with an open and listening heart. At the same time, never forget the power in your community to heal and bring reconciliation. Let us leverage the incredible power that Jesus has given us to build a stronger, better community to face the challenges before us.