

Cancel Culture
Matthew 18:15-20
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Have you ever had the experience of working through some sort of conundrum, some personal or communal problem, and then opened your devotional, or headed to a bible study or simply opened your bible to find that the exact word, the precise scripture you needed to hear was right there in front of you? I actually hear this a lot from people of faith, and I'm guessing this sort of spiritual Magic 8 Ball experience helps build their trust in their ongoing dialogue with God. And to be honest, this has happened to me on occasion but not very often. I usually have to go on a scavenger hunt, traversing through complicated historical contexts and problematic translations to ultimately find a true word for a personal situation with which I've been wrestling.

That said, if ever there was time for today's scripture from the Lectionary, it would be now. You see, our text from the Gospel of Matthew speaks to conflict resolution, and our context of the coinciding pandemics of Covid-19 and racism as well as the economic downturn all leading up to an extremely partisan national election leaves us starving for a word on reconciliation. A three step process for how to get along with our enemies? Yes, please.

The danger of this, of course, is the temptation to read into the text what we want to hear rather than what we need to hear. We call this "proof texting" in church world, and it is a dangerous practice indeed. People often ask me why people arrive to so many vastly different interpretations of scripture, and proof texting is a big part of that. And it's completely understandable because when we are so vulnerable, so hungry, for a clear, straightforward direction from God, we are liable to miss some key factors in our understanding.

Today's text is blunt and straightforward, and it stands completely apart from its context which can lead to us missing the true meaning as well as how we might apply what we learn. So, this is what I think you need to know. Jesus was speaking to his disciples on how to resolve church conflict. Bear in mind, these were not just Jesus followers, but these were Jesus doers. They were all working together, neck deep in the messy work of healing, feeding, clothing, and blessing the disenfranchised. So, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' words and instruction come:¹

After explaining that any behavior that disenfranchises members of the community is what dishonors God;

After the powerful demonstration of a Canaanite woman's faith;

After the bruised are comforted, the maimed are healed, and the amazed crowds praise God;

After Jesus asks the disciples to have compassion for a hungry crowd gathered before them;

After false teachers are exposed;

After it is explained that the people of God who gather in Jesus name have power and influence on earth that has eternal ramifications;

In other words, a lot has happened up to this point, and there is an underlying assumption of their shared mission to love all people NO MATTER WHAT. Unconditionally. A tall order, if you ask me.

The second thing to know is this comes right after Matthew's account of the parable of the lost sheep where the one lost sheep is favored over the 99 safe sheep. The affinity and top priority is that one lost

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5450>

sheep, even if we want to blame that lost sheep for getting lost in the first place. With this critical context in mind, I invite you hear Jesus' words to his disciples in Matthew 18:15-20:

¹⁵"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. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

What to do when a member of the church sins against you. A three step DIY process for conflict resolution. Or at least that's how it appears first glance. The Greek word translated as sin here is "hamartano" which is actually usually translated as "offend." In a world where EVERYBODY is offended about something, this scripture grabs my immediate attention. What humors me the most about this oddball directive in the middle of theological discourses and parables is that it is as if Jesus knew that if we were serious about being allies to the poor and marginalized, if we were serious about the mission of the church and our divine call, we are bound to get on each other's nerves. We are bound to step on each other's toes. We are bound to hurt one another.

Of course, this is not only true in the context of church, but it has become the default in our world. We are more deeply divided in our country and around our world than I can remember, and conversations with people twice my age said it was the worst they had ever seen. You may be familiar with the term "cancel culture," where people block, unfollow, and completely disengage with a person or group that says or does something that offends them. Beyond cancel culture, social media comments dehumanizing people and often even threatening their very lives have become the norm. Instead of talking with each other, we talk past each other feeding the monster of what some are calling a "Cold Civil War" in our country. It is violent, destructive, and utterly heartbreaking to wake up to this level of tension and hate every day.

While Jesus' words specifically address conflict resolution in the church, it is with the understanding that this sort of work starts at home and ideally offers a light of love and guidance to our world. And yet, I'm afraid we are not doing a great job of getting along in the church either. Our idea of conflict resolution after someone offends us is to gossip about it to others and then post a thinly veiled passive aggressive comment about it on Facebook. Or to hold a second "unofficial" church meeting in the parking lot when things didn't go our way. Or start an email or letter writing campaign with multiple signatures, all without ever having a direct conversation with the offender in the first place.

A few years ago, I was certified in a system called "Healthy Congregations" that utilized family systems theory to talk about conflict in the church. One of the concepts they taught us was called "triangulation." To explain what this means, pretend with me that Susie Church Member wants to put blue carpet in the narthex, but Bob Church Member wants red carpet. Rather than talking directly with each other about their disagreement, they each talk separately to a third party which could be the pastor, the buildings and grounds committee, or the clerk of session. So not only are Susie and Bob still in disagreement with one another, but now they are out recruiting people for their side and projecting their disagreement on others, thereby relieving some of the immediate tension between them but by spreading it to others like a disease. From this methodology, small issues become big issues become catastrophic issues.

Long before there was “Healthy Congregations” training, there was Jesus. And Jesus easily saw the toxicity of triangulation, and its power to tear the mission of the church apart. This is why he proposed this methodology of one-on-one communication privately at first, knowing that most conflict gets resolved at this stage if we would just be brave and give it a chance. You may be thinking if only our disagreements were as simple as carpet colors, although I have sat in more committee meetings hashing out arguments over such minor details than I would care to admit. But those were the good old days...now we are debating about safely offering in-person worship or how to challenge racism in White Christianity or devastatingly, which human beings we believe deserve our help and which ones don't.

It's as if we have forgotten the mission of the church and how to have calm and direct dialogue with one another about that mission. Perhaps we are out of practice of sitting in the tension and discomfort of such important and critical conversations. There is a lot of complexity and nuance that is not easily resolved, so perhaps we give up on reconciliation too soon. Perhaps we've lost faith that we will be heard. Perhaps we are afraid of our own world views being challenged and what that might mean for the lives we've built for ourselves. Or perhaps we've just lost hope.

I recently had the chance to catch up with an old friend of mine from seminary, Ashley Anne Masters, who is a campus minister in Raleigh. Because many campus activities have been scaled back and because she is a board certified chaplain, she has been working two jobs, offering pastoral care to victims of Covid-19 and their families through the local hospital. She told me the story of a family with young children whose elderly mother lived with them. Someone in the family contracted Covid which meant that everyone in the family did. Through tears, Ashley Anne told me the story of this grandmother who was hospitalized and dying and her son, her son's wife and children who were all too sick and weak to even get out of bed, much less accompany her at the hospital. Her son begged Ashley Anne, “Please, just don't let her die alone.” Ashley Anne promised that she would be there, putting her own health at risk to be by this matriarch's side. She informed the nursing staff of the family's wishes with instructions to call her day or night if the grandmother was close to death. The nurse never contacted Ashley Anne, and this grandmother died alone. Because of this story and countless others she has attended as they've died terrifying deaths, Ashley Anne is exhausted and angry at the way this pandemic has been managed in our country. She, like so many others overwhelmed in the healthcare industry, is begging for students to study at home online, for people to work from home and stay home if possible, to wear masks and wash their hands. She wants things to shut down because she loves humanity and wants to keep everyone safe.

Alongside that, I heard another story this week on NPR about remote learning in America as children head back to school. This week, they focused on a single mother in Charlotte named Sky.² She has 4 children ranging in age from 7 to 13, and she talked about the challenges of working full time at a grocery store as an essential worker while raising and educating her 4 children. They did not initially have Wi-Fi and devices for 4 kids when this crisis began, and she cannot afford to homeschool or hire tutors to help. After her story ran in the local news, private donors helped with WIFI and technology, but she still struggles with leaving them alone while she works. She says her son is old enough to babysit during that time, but he most certainly cannot do his own school work while helping the other three do theirs. She desperately needs things to reopen if her children are to have any prayer of not falling behind academically. Before the pandemic, the odds were stacked against this family, and this global crisis feels destined to seal their fate in an unending cycle of poverty.

This global pandemic has become yet another thing we disagree on, yet another thing that has been politicized. There are battle cries to reopen, and there are battle cries to shut down. There are very good

² <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/31/907811871/learning-curve-we-meet-a-mother-of-4-as-the-school-year-begins>

reasons for this debate, and yet somehow, they divide along party lines. In the midst of all this partisan fighting are stories of people's lives and unfortunately, their deaths. Stories that make the case for shutting everything down, and stories that make the case for throwing everything open; and everything in between. Perhaps this call to reconciliation from Jesus is not so much about the superficial details of church life like red carpet vs. blue carpet. Perhaps it is more about being neck deep in the mission of the church and listening to ALL the stories, not just the ones that are comfortable or that resonate with our political affiliation. Perhaps as we talk about re-opening our campus, we need less about debate about whether or not we can sing and how many ushers we need on Sunday morning and more about how we can be the church to the world, to prevent more grandmothers from dying and supporting the single mother and her children in their learning. With our recently upgraded campus wifi, could we open our campus to those without wifi? Could we offer tutoring to children in our community so that they won't fall behind? Could we do all this while enforcing safety measures that are backed by science to keep our grandmothers and everyone else healthy and safe?

Not if we continue to fight with each other. Not if we continue to be divided. Our only and I mean ONLY way out of this mess and every other mess is direct, respectful, loving conversation. Listening deeply to stories, and holding the tension of different needs and perspectives. Jesus is telling the church to invest our energy in Love and not the petty in-fighting. And Lord knows, we are united in our suffering. But we have a call that extends beyond our own personal needs. We have a moral obligation to commit to human flourishing of every kind. And in a global pandemic, that means keeping people safe from this virus as well as being allies to those who are suffering from a lack of resources and a lack of equity. Let's stop cancelling each other and share God's vision of the kingdom of heaven here on earth right here and right now. For Jesus promised that wherever two or three are gathered in his name, whether online or outdoors, masked and socially distanced of course, he is right there beside us, neck deep in the mess and beauty of the mission of the church. Amen.