

A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2014
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This passage from Matthew's gospel is troubling in many ways. Beyond the content itself, we have to acknowledge that it just doesn't sound like Jesus – certainly not the Jesus of the rest of Matthew's gospel. Amid all of the parables about the reign of God and the prophecies of his own death and his bantering with Peter and with outsiders, this lesson in parish conflict resolution seems more than a bit out of place.

And indeed many biblical scholars, and not just the Jesus Seminar, look on this as an interpolation by Matthew, the author of the gospel, addressing the concerns of his own community.

But that doesn't mean we can dismiss it out of hand. It's still part of the scripture that has shaped the faith that has been handed down to us and helped form the structures and norms of our churches. And it is the best explanation we have of an even more troubling passage from earlier in the same chapter of Matthew, the one about "if your eye offends you, pluck it out," and "if your right hand offends you, cut it off."

But even more than that, it's still pretty good advice.

If someone in your community sins against you, don't stew and fret in silence; don't unfriend him on Facebook or snub her in public; don't go to your friends and

start a whispering campaign; don't send e-mails to the priest and vestry – go talk to that person. Face to face. And go not to vent your anger and make yourself feel better, but with the goal of reconciliation.

And if that doesn't work, take a few others with you – as witnesses, the scripture says, to confirm what you say. Which is to say, as a reality check for you – to make sure that your complaint is valid and that you are not just stirring up trouble.

Because, and I know this is hard to believe, even in churches, sometimes people do that. And again, the goal is reconciliation, not conflict.

And only then, if the person refuses to listen to a serious issue, responsibly and lovingly brought before him or her, can you go public, and seek the help of the whole community in resolving your differences.

And here's the odd part of this bit of church management advice: Matthew reports that Jesus says that if the whole community agrees that the one you have attempted to reconcile with is in the wrong, and refuses to amend, then that one is to be treated like a gentile or a tax collector. Which is kind of ironic, if you think about it, because one of the reasons that Jesus gets in trouble with the religious authorities of his own community is that he refuses to treat gentiles and tax collectors like outsiders. Double dose of irony if you remember that Matthew, before he became a disciple, was himself a tax collector.

So maybe this is really Jesus speaking after all. He's painting a picture of the community of God as a place where differences are solved, not through triangulation or backbiting or brooding silence, but through open and honest conversation, kept in proportion and kept honest by the community. And he's describing a community which, even in the midst of conflict, does not, in the end, make anyone an outsider.

And Jesus finishes up his lesson with a charge to all of his followers that he previously gave to Peter: that whatever they bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever they loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. And you may recall that he said a similar thing to his followers about sin: that whatever sins they forgive on earth will be forgiven in heaven, and whatever sins they retain on earth will be retained in heaven.

Taken together, these charges put a terrible burden on the followers of Jesus. For this is not a conveying of divine authority; it is a declaration of human responsibility. The reign of God is not the purification of humankind, it is the triumph of forgiveness. It is the loosing of all captivity and the binding of all humankind into one family.

And Jesus is telling us that if we do not forgive, if we do not bind and we do not liberate, then the reign of God cannot be accomplished. The sin we don't forgive just won't go away.

Many Christians (at least those who are not iconoclasts) use a lot of religious images in their churches. But in Orthodox churches, those images, those icons, are central to religious practice and experience. They are understood to be windows into the divine, and by meditation and contemplation of those images, it is believed that the faithful can penetrate the veil between this world and the holy, and become “lost in wonder, love and praise,” as the hymn puts it.

And in a typical Orthodox church, the icons are arranged in a particular way. At the apex of the church, above all, will be an image of Jesus. Surrounding him will be, perhaps angels, but certainly the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Below them will be a ring of images of the twelve apostles, and below them the ancient leaders of the church and the founders and great leaders of that particular community. And below them, but part of the iconographic program, is the congregation. Not in dead images on the wall, but the living, breathing part of what, taken altogether, is meant to be the great icon, the great image of the reign of God, with the assembly a part of the picture.

Our worship space does not follow that same program of images –in fact, part of the beautiful simplicity of our building is that it has no permanent images of any kind. And indeed we might have a few theological issues with the organization of the Orthodox icons, believing that God has in mind a community that is less hierarchical, less masculine.

Nonetheless, when we gather here, whether two or three, or many (and, believe it or not, at St. James Parish we are many more than Matthew would ever have imagined could be gathered as a church) we are still supposed to be an icon of the reign of God. The world should be able to look at us and see love. The world should be able to look at us and see welcome. The world should be able to look at us and see abundance. The world should be able to look at us and see God.

But the world will not be able to see that if we cannot resolve our differences honestly and openly. And neither will the world be able to see that if we cover over our difference and pretend that we have none for the sake of appearances.

And the world will not see that, will not be able to see the image of God in us, unless we treat those outside our community with the same love and respect and generosity and honesty as we offer to those within the fold. Because in the reign of God, which we are called to represent, no one is outside the fold.

Amen.