

13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Matthew 18:15-20  
Peace Lutheran Church, Grass Valley - 9/07/14  
Pastor David Baker

## “HOW TO HANDLE CONFLICT”

*Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

By a show of hands, how many of us here this morning have ever been involved, in one way or another, in a conflict?

Good. This message is for all of us.

In our Gospel for today, as we read just a moment ago, Jesus is telling his disciples HOW TO HANDLE CONFLICT. He says:

*“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,”* that is, one who is outside of your community.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of how Jesus could be talking about the church, when the church did not even come into being until long after he had died, the fact is, conflict management . . . or, even better, conflict resolution . . . involves, if required, three distinctive steps.

First, try to handle it alone, if possible, the two of you who are involved in the dispute or the misunderstanding, so you can retain your individual privacy, integrity and confidentiality. That always is to be preferred.

But if that does not work . . . that is, if, in spite of the best efforts and the best intentions of the two of you, there is no reconciliation of the conflict . . . then, by all means, seek assistance from a couple of other people.

There is nothing wrong, per se, in asking a third party to assist you. In fact, it is better to do that than to give up, or to pretend that everything is fine when it is not.

But then, if . . . in spite of the help others may provide you as enablers or facilitators . . . there is still no resolution, let the whole community know what is going on. Involve as many people as you need to to resolve the problem. Sometimes the publicity alone will shame the factions into making peace.

Finally, if even the glare of the public spotlight does not change the situation, then know that you have done what you can. You have followed the three steps set forth by Jesus and if, in spite of all of that, your brother or your sister still refuses to make right that which is wrong, then know it is alright to let go and allow that which will be to be.

The goal of the community and of its individual members always should be reconciliation. Alas, however, there are always going to be people who will refuse to be reconciled. Leave them, our text says, alone, but only after you have taken all three of the steps prescribed.

Some time ago, one of our pastors told about his walking down the main street of a small mid-western town one day with one of his parishioners. The pastor had just moved to the town recently, while his companion was a long-time member of the congregation he had come to serve.

As they were walking, he was so intent, he stated, on the conversation they were having that he barely noticed that another man was coming toward them on the sidewalk. His companion, though, on recognizing the man coming toward them, promptly left the sidewalk and crossed over to the other side of the street. Though totally confused by what was happening, the pastor said, he followed.

Puzzled, he inquired, "Why did you cross the street so abruptly when you saw that man was walking toward us?" His response, he said, went something like this:

"Years ago, there was an argument in our church. The fight was so intense it lasted for almost a year and virtually destroyed the congregation. Many people left. Only a few remained. I had a nasty confrontation with that person over there."

The pastor asked, "What was the disagreement all about?"

The old-timer responded, "I've forgotten. I do not remember now, it was so long ago, but I vowed then that I would never speak to him again!"

Apparently, the words of Jesus in our Gospel for today had somehow never penetrated the heart or the mind of either of those two old men. Instead of dealing with the rift between them, they had let it widen until it became a yawning chasm and they never had permitted anybody else either, apparently, to help them bridge the gap or even try to heal the rift.

And so, instead of reconciliation there was an unresolved conflict. Instead of loving confrontation there was a silent hostility, and instead of peace there was what might best be described as an armed truce, although even that had never even been discussed, apparently.

What a sad commentary all of that is, not just on those two old men, but on the church itself. For we all know that it is not an isolated incident.

We all know people who have left the church . . . or other groups, as well, as far as that's concerned . . . for reasons that by now have been forgotten. They may have seemed like legitimate or understandable reasons at the time, although that, too, usually is questionable.

But without employing the steps Jesus outlines in our text today, the source of the conflict or misunderstanding sometimes never even is identified, much less addressed. There is no opportunity for listening, there is no chance to hear or come to a new understanding, and there is no way to heal the open wounds.

No wonder there are wars in our world. No wonder there are unresolved conflicts. No wonder there are people who are hurting when even those who are within the church . . . the body of our Lord . . . cannot employ the steps he outlined to resolve our differences. Shame on us!

Some years ago, when Gloria and I were living in a townhouse development in San Jose, I was elected president of the homeowners association. The reason that I was elected was that there had been four other presidents in the preceding 18 months, all of whom had either quit or been asked to resign, and the board, looking for a fifth . . . (and you can take that in whatever way you wish) . . . informed me that I was their last best choice to try to bring some order and stability into a situation that had gone from a calm, relatively easygoing association with a benevolent dictator at the helm when we first moved there seven years before that, to what could by this time best be described as a dysfunctional mess.

Reluctantly, I said I would accept election, not because I needed something more to do, which I did not, but because, as a Christian . . . that is, one who is a follower of Jesus Christ and of the principles he has set forth for daily life . . . I feel that it is my responsibility, wherever I may be, to use whatever skills or gifts that God has given me to try to benefit the neighborhood or the community in which I live and I had not, until that time, I'm sorry to admit, done much of anything to help to make that place a better one in which to live.

What the community most needed at that point, it seemed to me and others who discussed it with me, was a leader who knew: 1) how to listen and 2) how to conduct a meeting; and if there was anything that I had learned in my years as a parish pastor, it was those two things.

So I accepted nomination, was elected, and then, two days later, promptly left the country for a previously planned sabbatical from the congregation I was serving at the time, after receiving from the association's board a promise that they would not kill each other while I was away.

After I returned from the sabbatical, I spent a fair amount of time, as I recall, attempting, anyway, to get my head around the covenants and regulations governing the association. I met with each board member individually, getting to know him or her and listening to his or her concerns. I visited with several people in their homes,

doing the same thing, and Gloria and I led a seminar on how to have effective meetings and committees.

Shortly after that, for the first time in more years than anybody could remember, we had a social event at the clubhouse for the members of the association. About 40 people came, people from both sides of whatever rifts there were. People were visiting with one another, coming to know one another, and saying such things as, "it's good to be here," "there's a lot of positive energy here this afternoon," "it's good to see so-and-so here," "I'm glad I had the opportunity to meet some new people," and, "we need to do this again."

The week following the social event, I met with one of the men who had offended many people in the previous few years. I asked him if he would be willing to meet one-on-one with me and one or two of the people from whom he had become alienated to try to deal with whatever it was that had caused the rift. After considering it for a moment he said, "Yes, I would be willing to do that."

Then he went on to say, "You know, you're probably the best thing that has happened to this village in the past several years."

"Well," I replied, "I'm not so sure about that, but I certainly am willing to do what I can to bring some trust and some stability into the village. This is a good place to live, and I want to offer whatever skills I have to continue to make it so."

"Thank you," he said. "Let me know when we can sit down together." And before long we did, with a most positive result.

In the weeks and months and years that followed, both the board and the association meetings became places where some order finally was brought out of the chaos they had had, some leadership was exercised,

and a climate of trust began to be felt, all because the people involved finally took the time, with some encouragement, to listen to each other and to be the people God intended them to be.

As we today look at the world around us, we are overwhelmed, both by the scope, as well as by the number of both armed and unarmed conflicts in the world. From Israel and Gaza to Iraq and Syria, from Russia and Ukraine to Central Africa and Afghanistan, from Ferguson, Missouri to the borders that we share with Mexico, and from the halls of Congress to the halls and corridors and meeting places of more than a few of our local governmental and non-governmental entities, conflict is not just a sometime thing, it is, it seems, too often nowadays, almost a way of life.

Does it, however, really need to be this way? Can we not, as a people and, particularly, as a Christian people, learn, as Rodney King so pointedly asked several years ago as he was being beaten by some police officers, just learn to "get along"?

And we? What about us here at Peace Lutheran Church? Do we have conflicts that still need to be resolved? Are there, beneath the surface, underlying issues that have yet to be addressed? Are there some elephants still in the room?

If so, these next few weeks are a prime time in which to deal with them. As we conclude our transition from one regularly called pastor to another who is yet to be determined, this would be a good time to resolve those issues, to identify just what they are, to seek out those who may have differed with us on them, to sit down together, one on one or two by two, and talk them through.

And then, if that does not resolve the matter, let us have another congregational event, this time addressing what may sometimes be referred to as the “shadow images” or the “dark corners” of the church and come, if not to a unanimous conclusion, then at least to one with which we all can live in peace and harmony.

After all, if a secular homeowners association can do that, and do it successfully, how much more can it be done within a Christian . . . or, if you prefer, a Lutheran . . . congregation?

The key to all of this, of course, as we have said, is found in our Gospel for today. It calls us to take seriously Jesus’ admonition to confront each other lovingly, to listen to each other carefully, and to use faithfully the gifts of the whole community to deal with conflict.

In the concluding words of our Gospel for today, Jesus said to the disciples, *“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. Again, 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”*

What more could we ask? So let it be ordered. So let it be done.

*“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Amen.*