

September 6, 2020
Matthew 18: 15-20

It Takes Two (or Three)
Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

I ran across some old photos the other day, several of which were from my first days as a student at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Entering seminary classes always spend an intense 3 days together at orientation before the Fall semester of classes begin. I was struck by two characteristics of these photos: 1) how young I looked and 2) how I was smiling and fraternizing with some people who, by the end of our three years together, would not remain close friends. During orientation, before the essays and exams and finals chipped away our sanity, everyone was fresh and excited—ready to explore God’s call. And everyone got along. We wanted to hang out together. We felt united by a common love for the church. Most of all, we were excited to belong to a unique and close-knit community.

Needless to say, those halcyon days of early Seminary didn’t last. Oh, sure, we remained a close-knit community, but we eventually drifted into smaller affinity groups. Stress of class, personal lives, and ecclesial demands caused fissures in our class’s façade. By graduation, most of us had drifted apart in both expected and unexpected ways. In the early days of our seminary career, we were drunk on the idea of community and togetherness. But eventually we discovered that the seminary community was like every other community we had encountered. There were jealousies, petty arguments, egos, and personal agendas. When the euphoria of those first days wore off, we were left with people, some of whom we discovered we didn’t like all that much!

Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever wanted to be a part of a community so badly, only to be disappointed by the behavior you encountered?

Now for many seminarians, the biggest shock of attending seminary is learning that the people there do not always behave like Christians. You might think that a group of women and men studying to be pastors would be exemplary followers of Jesus; after all, no one wants to be the patient of a Medical doctor who graduated last in her class. But one of the hardest lessons seminary teaches is that community is made up of people. And people are fallible. Communities disappoint. In a commentary about this week’s Gospel reading, David Lose reflects:

“Community, after all, is one of those feel-good words that draw us into idealisms -- we imagine something out of Cheers, a place where you're accepted for who you are, where you're never lonely, and where, of course, everyone knows your name. But the really difficult thing about community is that it's made up of people! And people -- not you and me, of course, but most people -- can be difficult, challenging, selfish, and unreliable. Which means that usually when we're daydreaming about community we're often prompted to do so because we don't particularly like the people -- i.e., the community! -- we're currently a part of.”¹

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1601>

One of the loudest critiques I often hear of the Christian church is that it's full of hypocrites. It's true, of course. All of us, including me, profess our faith on Sundays but may not necessarily live into our faith on Mondays. But what I really think people mean when they say the church is full of hypocrites is that the Church has failed to be the community that they are seeking. People, disaffected and disillusioned by a world, long for a community where they can feel safe and accepted. Ideally, the church is such a place. After all, the world is full of conflict, from disagreements between neighbors to political arguments that seem to anchor 24-hour cable news networks. People are tired of all the fighting. The last thing they want to do is walk into a congregation that's arguing about carpet colors in the sanctuary.

Yet, it is unrealistic to expect that everything in the church will always be hunky-dory between congregation members (and even the pastor). Churches are people, after all. So what if the church modeled for the world what it looks like to engage conflict like Jesus suggests we do? As one Bible commentary remarks, "What makes us Christian is not whether or not we fight, disagree, or wound one another, **but how we go about addressing and resolving these issues.**"² One of the most powerful witnesses the church can give the world is how to address and resolve conflict. Jesus gives us the guidelines in today's Gospel lesson. What's interesting is that Jesus understands that his followers (and later, the church) are going to quarrel and sin against each other. Therefore, Jesus reminds us that Christians are called to handle conflict in a specific manner.

- When sin happens and you're involved, do something about it; namely, go talk to the other person directly like a mature adult rather than behind his or her back.
- If that doesn't work, involve some others of the community.
- If that doesn't work, then things are serious and you're all at risk.

The world needs models of healthy and Christ-like ways of approaching and resolving conflict. People desire community and the church has long been one of the primary ways humans have engaged communal living. One commentary for today's Gospel reading reminds us: "Like other communities, there will be conflict in the church, but it is precisely through conflict that we model for the world how to bind and loose one another appropriately. Thereby we witness to the world Christ's ministry of reconciliation, which overcomes all divisions through the power of the cross."³

So the question I am posing for you today is:

² Bartlett, David L.; Barbara Brown Taylor (2011-05-31). Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4, Season after Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ) (Kindle Locations 1760-1761). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

³ Bartlett, David L.; Barbara Brown Taylor (2011-05-31). Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4, Season after Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ) (Kindle Locations 1790-1792). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

September 6, 2020
Matthew 18: 15-20

It Takes Two (or Three)
Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

What kind of community do we want from our congregation?

Do we want a largely social, somewhat superficial (which is, of course, safe)? Do we want something more meaningful or intimate (which is riskier and harder)? Do we want a place that can both encourage us and hold us accountable? Are we looking for a place we can be honest about our hopes and fears, dreams and anxieties? Do we want somewhere we can just blend in or are we looking for a place we can really make a difference?⁴

As David Lose points out, "Authentic community is hard to come by. It's work. But it's worth it. Because when you find it, **it's like discovering a little bit of heaven on earth**; that is, it's like experiencing the reality of God's communal fellowship and existence in your midst. And, as Jesus promises, when you gather in this way -- with honesty and integrity, even when it's hard -- amazing things can happen because Jesus is with you, right there, in your very midst, forming and being formed by your communal sharing."

Let us pray:

God of love, help us shape our community so that it more closely resembles your heavenly kingdom. Amen.

⁴ I am thankful for David Lose for posting these provocative questions.