

Sermon Trinity + 13. Ezekiel 33 7-11 and Matthew 18 15-20. Rev'd Lisa Cornell. 6th September 2020.

We live our lives imperfectly sharing relationships that operate with varying degrees of harmony and conflict. Our two Bible readings today offer us insight into how we might navigate difficulties more effectively to both anticipate and work through problems. The reading from Ezekiel is a reminder for us to be watchful for our enemies. Arguably our greatest enemies are the temptations of Sin. The Gospel passage focusses upon relationship breakdown. That is, what to do if your "brother" offends or sins against you. In this context, a brother would be another person with whom you have a relationship at church. Our starting point as Christians is the call to love one another. But how can we be both loving and in conflict or dispute and work to reach a place of forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus suggests a three-point plan.

We need to be direct. We so often complain about someone or something without ever telling the person responsible. Instead of doing something to address the problem and the person responsible; we engage in various forms of behaviour such as tutting, eyerolling or muttering under our breath. Another strategy popular in workplaces often prefaced with phrases such as "this is a gentle reminder" is the placing of a passive aggressive note or the sending of a round robin e mails (usually cc'd to the management) asking for a practice to cease. So much of these low-level resentments that bubble beneath the surface can be resolved more effectively with gentle and direct conversation when a problem first emerges.

Where a quick and direct approach does not work, Jesus suggests that we need to involve others. However, this involvement should not be in the form of idle gossip. Broadening the conversation at this stage has two benefits. Firstly, in seeking the counsel of others we are more likely to gauge what is reasonable and whether we rather than the other is the problem. Secondly having others present, offers both sides in a dispute witnesses to their conversation. Something of great benefit if problems escalate. Jesus' third stage of bringing things to the church is counter-intuitive at first sight but makes a lot of sense. Sometimes a dispute is the result of a systemic problem that needs tackling at an organizational level. Issues around safeguarding and discrimination come to mind for me here. Also, some issues may not be immediately resolvable in private or through formal process and we may need to bring them to church in the sense of praying for discernment and a greater sense of peace. In my experience there is nothing like sharing sacrament with those I disagree with to help put things into perspective.

Later in the passage Jesus reminds the disciples that when two or three are gathered in his name, he is there also. This is both reassuring and acts as a check and balance. If two or three Christians gather, there should be evidence that Jesus himself has touched the lives of those present. Any disciplining we do of one another in Jesus' name should be as witnesses of Christ. That is, with loving integrity, with the purpose of retaining unity and within the spirit of encouraging mutual flourishing.

How we handle conflict in church settings should align with all our relationships both public and private. In all we are and all we do; we are called to embody God's love. This is rarely easy. Part of our journeying through life in a community is that at times we are broken and at other times called to notice and support others in their brokenness. By bearing with one another through difficult times we can become a much more resilient community. We often grow most in the times that are most difficult. Our scars can inform us as much as those parts of us which are outwardly beautiful. There is a ceramics practice used in Japan that offers us a helpful metaphor. Kintsugi is the Japanese art of putting broken pottery pieces back together with gold. It is built on the idea that by embracing flaws and imperfections, you can create an even stronger, more beautiful piece of art. Every break is unique and instead of repairing an item like new, this 400-year-old technique highlights the "scars" as a part of the design. Using this as a metaphor for healing ourselves and our relationships, Kintsugi teaches us an important lesson: Sometimes in the process of repairing what is broken, we create something more unique, beautiful, and resilient.

Our readings today encourage us to notice danger. Ezekiel encourages us to warn others of danger and Matthew's Gospel teaches us ways to heal once the danger happens. Jesus himself was broken on the cross so we might be restored into right relationship. In our dealings with one another we need to acknowledge Jesus' sacrifice and strive for wholeness. We need to be responsible for our part in both breaking and healing others and be prepared to act as Jesus' witness as issues of pain and conflict are resolved. Amen