

Sermon: Matthew 18: 15-20 (Confrontation)

On the flight home from New Orleans a couple of weeks ago, Paulette and I were seated behind a rather loud, middle-aged man. I recall that he said to the passenger next to him, “You know on every flight there has to be some loud-mouthed guy on the plane – well, I’m the guy!” I thought to myself, “Well, grand. Which is worse, this or a screaming child?”

And the guy proceeded to live up to his self-declared reputation. Ignoring the announcement to put away all cell phones, he continued to involve us all in a conversation we did not want to hear. He went on talking on his cell phone, even after the stewardess politely asked him to stop. Only putting it away after the second personal request, and that after a few more seconds of talking.

At this point he turns around to the stewardess as she was walking down the aisle and called out, “OK pumpkin.” With a grin on his face. She came back to his seat, and said something to him in a very quiet voice.

Later in the flight she came by and asked for drink requests. But when she came to him, she told him that she was not going to serve him alcohol. He protested, but she didn’t back down. For the rest of the flight he alternated between ignoring her, and making remarks about her refusal to serve him. Accusing her of being an unfriendly person. She was polite, asking whether she could serve him coffee, or juice, or a soft drink. He curtly said, “Never mind.”

Bill Krieger
All Saints of the Desert
September 7, 2008; 17 Pentecost, Proper 18; Year A

After we landed we stood up to join the line for those getting off the plane, and as usual I had Paulette go ahead of me. The guy turns to Paulette and says, “I’m the alcoholic in the row ahead of you. Can you believe that the stewardess refused to serve me alcohol? What kind of nonsense is this, anyway?” And without missing a beat Paulette says, “Well, you were pretty obnoxious.” He was caught off guard for just a second, and then said, “Well, I guess I’ll have to own it then.”

A true story, to the best of my recollection. Conflict, it seems, is everywhere. None of us like it. Although sometimes you wonder, considering how persistent it is. The problem I had in preparing this sermon was in pruning. There were far too many stories to include. They tend to stick in your mind, and in your craw.

Our gospel today is all about church conflict, and the right way to confront another church member who has dealt with us poorly. But it is interesting to me to see how the commentaries come down on our gospel lesson. Barclay writes, “In many ways this is one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the whole of Matthew’s gospel. Its difficulty lies in the undoubted fact that it does not ring true; it does not sound like Jesus; it sounds much more like the regulations of an ecclesiastical committee.”¹

Barclay goes on to say, “It is not possible that Jesus said this in its present form. Jesus could not have told his disciples to take things to the Church,

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2, p. 187.

Bill Krieger
All Saints of the Desert
September 7, 2008; 17 Pentecost, Proper 18; Year A

for it did not exist. Most commentators note Matthew's use of the Greek term, *ekklesia*. Used in only two places in all the gospels – here, and the passage where Jesus says to Peter, “Upon this rock I will build my Church.” The Anchor Bible commentary is unusually brief, but speaks of an editor of Matthew adding the part about witnesses. Based upon an adaptation of Mosaic Law (Deut 19:15).

The Interpreter's Bible states, “Would he, could he have said, ‘Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector? Such words certainly do not accord with his other teaching or with his own acts . . . Rather than attempt impossible ‘reconciliations,’ it is better to assume that these verses . . . are not a transcript of his very words, but a reflection of the thought and practice of the early church.”²

In preaching on this passage, in a sermon titled, “*Tell It Like It Is!*” The Rev. Dr. Elton Richards begins, “Shame on Matthew for such sloppy editing! Shame on Matthew for putting words into the mouth of Jesus!” He goes on to say, “Whereas this text on processing grievances may have had relevance for Matthew's church, I would hardly recommend it today. I have neither preached on this passage nor practiced its admonitions in my ministry. Where I have seen it used, I have seen it abused.”³

I take issue with Pastor Richards. Church conflict is one of the most damaging forces in negating our witness. It is well nigh universal, and

² The Interpreter's Bible, Matthew, p. 472.

³ <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=432>

Bill Krieger
All Saints of the Desert
September 7, 2008; 17 Pentecost, Proper 18; Year A

something that is often mishandled. It can become vicious in a way that would not be tolerated in the business community or the outside world.

What do we usually do, if someone in the church acts in an “unchristian” manner towards us? We don’t confront. We complain to others about our treatment by this person, by name. And if push comes to shove, we leave.

Most of us see the moral logic of confronting the person in private. But we rarely, if ever do this. And there are several reasons. We are angry, offended, and just plain can’t stand the person. So the last thing we want to do is to talk with them. We don’t really expect them to change, to admit doing anything wrong. So what’s the point? And we figure there’s a better than 50/50 chance of things escalating, and who wants to be subjected to yet more abuse?

Good reasons, but there’s a downside. There is pent up anger that eats away at us. A sense of powerlessness, that frustrates. An impulse to bring it up with others, garnering support and leading to factions. And, of course, there is little prospect of reconciliation if we don’t speak with our adversary.

If we are reluctant to confront the person directly, we are even less inclined to drag others into the conflict. Except by gossip. We don’t want to put our friends into an uncomfortable situation. They are apt to tell us that they can’t stand the person either, that it won’t do any good, that they will just be abused too. And there is always the possibility that our friends might not see things the same way we do.

Bill Krieger
All Saints of the Desert
September 7, 2008; 17 Pentecost, Proper 18; Year A

And what of bringing it before the Church? Who exactly is the Church? The clergy, the vestry, everyone sitting in the pews? They aren't all our friends – they may challenge us, they may take issue with us. And it sounds very much like this last step could lead to excommunication. Is it warranted in this case? Are we really unwilling to break bread with the offending person over this? In 1 Corinthians Paul speaks of expelling the immoral person from the congregation. Are we at that point?

I think that a case can be made for trying to follow the procedure outlined in our gospel today. So if your brother or sisters sins against you, I want you to consider the following. First, talk with them. In private. No emails, no letters, no complaining to others. Talk with them.

Share your feelings with them, don't berate them. Use the standard marriage counseling advice in confronting them. "When you did (such and such), you made me feel (name your emotional response)." [By the way, if you do this often enough with your spouse, they're apt to erupt in uncontrolled laughter. With God's grace, so will you.]

If your private discussion proves ineffective, ask if they would be willing to bring in a neutral party. Someone you both get along with and respect. Then follow through. If the 3rd party does not agree with you, let it drop. For good.

Bill Krieger
All Saints of the Desert
September 7, 2008; 17 Pentecost, Proper 18; Year A

If the 3rd party agrees with you, and there is still no acknowledgment of wrongdoing, the two of you decide whether to take it to the rector and/or the vestry. If so, the offending party should be invited to come before the clergy or lay leadership, to give their perspective on the situation. If the church representatives agree that the action was wrong, and if the person remains intransigent, the clergy and vestry should discuss disciplinary measures.

Tough, isn't it. Uncomfortable. But the focus is always to be on reconciliation. Even when Paul writes of expelling the immoral brother, the purpose is "that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."⁴ Our gospel today comes between two related teachings. That of the good shepherd, who seeks out the one stray sheep. Who rejoices more over finding the single lost sheep than over the 99 who never went astray. And the other teaching is about forgiveness. Not seven times. But 70 times 7. The implication? That today's focus is on restoration, on grace.

There's a baseball story I'd like to share. It's about Hank Greenberg, a great ball player from the 1930's and 40's. Elected into the Hall of Fame in 1956, receiving 85% of the votes. The story also involves Jackie Robinson, who broke the color barrier in 1947 by signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Now Greenberg was a Jew, and had suffered heckling for this early in his career. But by this time he was a revered figure in the game. Here's how Greenberg remembered the day his Pittsburgh Pirates played the Dodgers, in May 1947: "Jackie came into Pittsburgh on a Friday afternoon, and the

⁴ 1 Cor 5: 5

Bill Krieger
All Saints of the Desert
September 7, 2008; 17 Pentecost, Proper 18; Year A

place was jammed. We were in last place and the Dodgers were in first. Our Southern ballplayers, a bunch of bench jockeys, kept yelling at Jackie, ‘Hey, coal mine, hey coal mine, hey you black coal mine, we’re going to get you. You ain’t gonna play no baseball . . . you dumb black son of a bitch.’”

Early in the game Jackie Robinson got to first base. He took a lead off the base, and the pitcher tried to pick him off. Robinson slid hard into the first baseman, Greenberg.

The crowd quieted, waiting for his response. But Greenberg reached down, gave Robinson a hand, and helped him up. No one missed the gesture. Later in the game Greenberg told Robinson not to pay any attention to the razzing, and he invited him over for dinner that evening.

After the game, Robinson said of Greenberg, “Class tells. It sticks out all over . . .”⁵

I think that’s the message of our gospel today. It’s about grace. It’s about class. It’s about how we treat our brothers and sisters in Christ, when they slide in with spikes high. It’s how we want others to see us, to see Christ in us. To have them say, “Class tells, grace tells. It sticks out, all over.”

⁵ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading, (Harvard Business School Press, Boston), 2002, p.216.