

Reflection on the Scripture: Matthew 18:15-20

[[The video of the reflection.](#)]

The reading from Matthew 18 lays out what to do when there is conflict in a church community. First the person who was offended goes to the offender. If there isn't reconciliation, then the offended grabs one or two other people and tries again. Still no reconciliation? Then the offended gets the whole church involved. And if that doesn't work, there is a remedy where the community can place them outside the circle of intimacy that the community has formed.

The way it's laid out, it gives multiple opportunities for reconciliation, for the matter to be handled privately and quietly, for simple misunderstandings to be sorted out without dragging everyone into it. I'm grateful to have such an explicit process laid out in the Gospels. If nothing else, it shows that Jesus expected conflict in the communities that gathered in his name.¹ And, on the face of it, he expected the conflict to increase over time.² Perhaps that's not surprising when you consider that churches are and should be the place where troublesome people get together.³

If I'm honest, I would love to be able to use that process in our political environment. I'd demand to be put on someone's schedule. And then I'd let them know how they offended me. Then, when we weren't reconciled, I'd go get one or two others and try again. Then I'd get the whole community involved. And in the end, we'd probably draw a circle around ourselves and say that we'd be in relationship with that person, but only in a very distant way. Basically, I'd have done all the steps I need to do in order to cross them off the Christmas card list. They are effectively out of my life until they change their tune. Regardless which end of the political spectrum you're on, I think most people agree that that's exactly how it would go, with no reconciliation happening at all. So you could argue it's a lousy way to produce reconciliation.

It does have some strengths. It's easier to know when you've been offended than when you've offended someone.⁴ It does expect action from the person

¹ Jin S. Kim, "Proper 18, Pastoral Perspective, Matthew 18:15-20" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 46.

² Anna Carter Florence, "Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost," in *Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence: Reflections on the Gospel Readings (2016-2017) Revised Common Lectionary*. (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 2016), 114.

³ Eric Barreto, "Commentary on the Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20", Working Preacher "Lectionary Commentaries for September 7, 2014, Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost", https://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=492&print_type=comm&is_sp_anish=0 (accessed 18 April 2020).

⁴ Audrey West, "Commentary on the Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20", Working Preacher "Lectionary Commentaries for September 6, 2020, Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost",

who has been offended, so the offense doesn't get to fester. It does get the community involved, so one exotic sense of grievance will be checked by the rest of the folks saying, "hold on, that's not worth getting bent out of shape about."

But those strengths become weaknesses outside of a church community. Yes, it is easier to know when you're offended than when you've offended someone. But if you value being right more than being in relationship, then there's clearly an easy way for you to keep gathering people around you who also think you're right. You never have to reflect on what you might need to change in order to restore the relationship. What's laid out in Matthew 18 assumes there's a relationship there to begin with. How else are you going to approach someone and say, "hey, you know that thing you said. It really hurt."? Churches assume there is a relationship between everyone and God and therefore between everyone and everyone else. Churches are a place where we work on those relationships. Even when we don't want to. Especially when we don't want to.

Churches also have a stated bias to favor the weak and unimportant over the powerful and the important. If you read Matthew chapter 18 leading up to today's verses, you see Jesus dismissing the question of "who is the greatest?" and what to do when some innocent sheep wanders away on its own. I can call up someone and demand to be put on their schedule so I can let them know how they have offended me. But I just some random jamoke. I'm not going to get through the first step in the process because I'm nobody. They are safe in ignoring me.

In a church, we're supposed to defend all the Nobodies and make sure their voices can be heard. Indeed, when you read about instances where the Matthew 18 process has failed in churches, quite often it's where offenders say that the process wasn't followed, that the first step of one on one reconciliation wasn't attempted. Only those offenders were people who preyed on the weak and vulnerable Nobodies, who wanted the one on one conversations to intimidate and threaten them into further silence. Even as churches, we are biased to give the rich and powerful more sway in our communal life. But we're supposed to pay attention to the least of these, not the greatest among us.

We can look at the process in Matthew 18 and we can think it's great because it's so clear or not so great because it's so vulnerable to the worst of human nature. But look what it says at the end: *For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them* (Matthew 18:20). Our life together is how God has chosen to be with us. Our life together is of ultimate importance to God. It's where we are comforted, confronted, tested and hopefully redeemed, by God,

through one another. It's where we come to know God or flee from God, precisely because we come to know or flee from each other.⁵

Part of what church is is not a place to retreat from the real world, but a place to engage the real world, subject to Christ's loving presence and expectation. It's a place to try out what the real world would be like if we truly gave preference to the nobodies, where everyone was held to loving account, not just the scapegoats that the majority turned against. Loving God and loving your neighbor, and we're catching on that the two aren't that different from one another, isn't easy, even when Jesus lays out step-by-step instructions on what to do. Because in the end we have to do the work. The hard work. But it is in that hard work that we come that much closer to God. Amen.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 89.