

Matthew 18.10-20

Children:

Love actually opening scene utube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcKjdBB6SUK>

Ideas about what love might mean.. sometimes love is tough and may even mean confronting someone who offends us... today explore what it might mean to love our neighbours even those with whom we disagree.. We will consider what it means to have a generous heart...

Sermon notes:

Conflict so often arises out of a lack of generosity..

Jan Richardson:

In our gospel reading, 'Jesus speaks to the challenge and the wonder of being in community. He recognizes that being his follower, being part of his body, will not relieve us of brokenness. Jesus is clear that being Christian doesn't mean avoiding conflict, and that discord should not be allowed to infect the entire body. He lays out a plan that requires his followers to engage a brother or sister who has done harm. His plan is one that seeks to preserve the dignity of the one perceived to have done wrong and to restore his or her relationship with the community.

Jesus' blueprint for dealing with conflict is an ambitious one. It places a lot of trust in a church's ability to discern what constitutes a sin and to deal with one another in ways that are both forthright and loving. I appreciate that he thought his followers could be this mature.

We Christians haven't always been so good at this. In the presence of brokenness among the church community, we have often either avoided making a direct response, or we have inflicted punishment that precludes ongoing relationship'.¹

What do we do when things go wrong in relationships?

Often I avoid conflict, sweeping the issues under the carpet to mould and grow. Our passage contains tips for handling conflict.

The theme of the whole of chapter 18 is dealing with people who go astray. Matthew surrounds the traditional rules of conflict resolution with the message of compassion and forgiveness. Next week we will hear Peter's question about forgiveness and Jesus' reply that forgiveness is

¹ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/08/31/for-what-binds-us/>

possible not just 7, but 77 times. In other words forgiveness is never to be abandoned.

The verses immediately preceding today's gospel retell the parable of the lost sheep, only it now applies it to the issue of what to do when a community member goes astray (18:12-14). Compassion seeks the lost. The whole chapter begins with the lesson about greatness: to humble oneself as a child.'

'Matthew is not abandoning the need to confront abuse. He is not espousing the kind of phoney harmony which sweeps abuse under the carpet in the name of Christian peace. But it is clear that he is not prepared to abandon people to being treated like second class citizens: Gentiles and tax collectors, although this is what the tradition had said.

The ultimate punishment is to be treated like a gentile or a tax collector. Yet, how does Jesus treat gentiles and tax collectors?

Doesn't he earn his reputation precisely because of his openness to including gentiles and tax collectors in his community?

Jesus became known as one who embraced those from whom he felt most repelled.

So, treat them like Gentiles and tax collectors, people who no longer belong, and then relate to them the way Jesus related to tax collectors and commissioned that we should relate to Gentiles: offer to them acceptance and forgiveness! Don't write them off!

'First century conflict management suggests, if you have a problem with someone's behaviour, go and see them and talk with them about it. By implication, don't go and gossip to someone else about it. Every community needs to learn this, every generation, regularly. Deal with the issue where it belongs. There may be occasions where this is not the preferred action in terms of creative handling of the conflict. Sometimes one must go directly to the police or the body skilled to handle the issue (such as sexual abuse complaints).²

Sometimes our role will be to refer people to such authorities. But it is never right to go to others just to turn them against someone, in self indulgent gossip, which does not give the other person a chance. It is never right to play the game of gaining friendship with one person by denigrating another and enjoying the fellowship of denigration, which is so common.'

² Loader

'At an international level the most obvious application is: negotiate. Don't rush to sabre rattling. Talk and listen. Seek to achieve settlement by meeting and talking, by seeking to appreciate the reasons why this or that unacceptable response has arisen. It also means avoiding the naïve, not pretending there is no danger.

At whatever level, we are ultimately dealing with human beings who are to be respected and honoured. Intervention by force to prevent violation of others is sometimes necessary, but should come as a last resort. Much more can be achieved through negotiation than is usually assumed'.

'Our strategies vary greatly whether we come at conflict from hate or love, whether we believe we must avoid conflict or not, whether we believe peace is niceness or responsible openness'.³

In Romans 13.8 we heard 'Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law'

'In his conjectures of a guilty bystander', Thomas Merton writes, 'if I can unite in myself, the thoughts and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and Latin fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians.... We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ. All of this is uniquely the work of God.'⁴

Bearwatcher, an Apache medicine man teaches:

'In the Apache language there is no word for 'guilt'. There is no word for 'shame'. Our lives are like diamonds. When we are born we are pure and uncut. Each thing that happens to us in our lives teaches us how to reflect the light of the world; each experience gives us a new cut, a new facet in our diamond. How brilliantly do those diamonds sparkle whose facets are many, to whom life has given many cuts!

So when you feel that the rain is no longer playful but harsh, and when the snow has lost its beauty, hold your diamond in your hand. Do not feel shame. Do not feel guilt. Think instead of the way you may now reflect the light of the world, and be thankful for the new cut you have received on your diamond'⁵.

Jan Richardson:

Where we find a place of connection amid conflict, where we gather in the name of the one who calls us to be his body, where we give ourselves to

³ Loader

⁴ Travelling Light , Your journey to wholeness Daniel J O'Leary, the Columba Press 2001 2

⁵ in O'Leary p95

knowing one another: that is not only astounding, it is a miracle that moves heaven and earth.⁶

In the end conflict resolution arises from a generous giving heart. Love and judgement are not exclusive - God does both. However God has commanded us to love, not judge. Can you think of people around you who could do with a little more love and a little less judgement? Are we able to intervene and offer that love? If not, can we at least pray for them on a regular basis? We have a big challenge before us..

Susanna

⁶ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/08/31/for-what-binds-us/>