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Conflict

Lessons in Leadership

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

This worship service addresses the uncomfortable but unavoidable reality of conflict, looking to Jesus' clear roadmap in Matthew 18 for faithful reconciliation. Rather than airing grievances, we will use this time to practice empathy, praying for those we experience friction with and recognizing them as fellow image-bearers of God. Ultimately, we will be reminded that we do not navigate these difficult challenges alone, finding our refuge and strength together in God's protective presence.

REFERENCES

Exodus 12:1-14

Psalm 149

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

COLORS

Green

Preaching Notes

Focus text: Exodus 12:1-14, Matthew 18:15-20

When I was a kid, we had different clothes for church and for the rest of our lives. Sometimes we had to keep school clothes separate from everyday clothes, but even that got a little fuzzy. But church clothes were distinct. Oh, once in a great while, if we were going to some fancy gathering of some sort, then we were told to wear church clothes. But since my dad was a pastor, even those

fancy things were really church things, just during the week. Or a party with church people. So, it was still church, in a way.

The funny thing about church clothes is that they were more than just clothes. Yes, they were nicer looking and worn less often. And yes, we took the time to polish our church shoes on Saturday nights. But I knew even as a fairly young child that when mom told me to wear church clothes, she was asking for more than just what I put on my body. “Church clothes” didn’t just look a certain way; they were worn a certain way. She was asking me to put on my church attitude. She was drawing attention to the fact that certain things were expected of me in this outfit. And I don’t just mean keeping it clean. Or maybe I do mean that. Keep it clean in thought, word, and attitude. Keep it clean in how we treat one another. Keep it clean in what we say about people behind their backs. Keep it clean.

That is the baby that got thrown out with the bathwater, I’m afraid. When we went away from church clothes, did we go away from church attitudes? And we have gone away from church clothes. I remember hearing a choir director tell her young folks to wear church clothes to a concert that they were performing somewhere. And then she had to describe church clothes. Most of them were used to dressing for church pretty much as they did every day. Those young folks had never even heard the phrase “church clothes.”

I know, I sound like some old geezer who remembers how things were back in my day. I’m not really complaining, just observing. In fact, I think it is good that we don’t have church clothes anymore. At least, it is a good thing if we got rid of them because we believe that we are always in our church clothes and our church attitudes.

I’m pretty sure Jesus didn’t want us to compartmentalize our lives into church and non-church. I’m pretty sure Jesus wants us to live every day as though we were in the presence of God— because we are. I think he wants us to live every day as though we love our neighbors as ourselves.

Yet we need reminders. We need to take a moment to take off the clothes of this world with all the expectations that go with that and put on our church clothes again. This process of reminding, of taking the time to reset our thinking and acting, is the answer to the question we often get asked: “Why do people need the church?”

Matthew is the only gospel writer who uses the word “church.” The word appears in only two passages: here and in chapter 16, where he tells Peter that he will be the foundation of the church. That means “church” is significant when it appears, and we ought to pay attention. On the other

hand, the word “church” appears seventy-two times in the epistles. (If you count Revelation as an epistle. All the occurrences of the word are in the first three chapters, which are the letters to the seven churches, and the book of Acts, which is the companion piece to the letters— or the acting out of the conversations in the letters.)This means that Paul and the other letter writers are concerned about helping us be the church we are called to be. So, there were lots of choices.

In our Gospel text, the church’s function is to be a force for reconciliation. In fact, you could argue that from a gospel perspective, it is the only function of the church. We are in the business of putting things together, of healing the breaches between people, of overcoming what keeps us apart. It is about making sure no one feels like an outsider.

“Wait a minute,” you might say, “there is a call to outsider-ness in this passage.” We have been taught to believe that we are to give reconciliation our best shot, but if it doesn’t work, then we can boot folks out. That is what verse 17 is saying, isn’t it?

Is it? Verse 17 says that if the one who has caused the offense refuses to be reconciled, then treat them “as a Gentile and a tax collector.” “Boo, hiss,” we say, “toss them out.” Except, wait a minute, how did Jesus treat tax collectors? He put one on his team. How did Jesus treat Gentiles? He preached to them; he invited them. Yes, there were a couple of incidents where he seemed a bit harsh toward a Gentile, but after a reminder, he turned and welcomed.

Despite centuries of church history, I don’t think these words give permission to cut anyone off. Instead, we treat them, the sinners, the breakers of the covenant, with love and invitation. We are always trying to heal what is broken. We might have to change tactics in dealing with those who refuse to be a part of the community. Jesus treated those inside the community much differently from those outside. He was worse with those inside—worse as in harder on; worse as in higher expectations; worse as in ready to call them out and point out their failings. The outsider was encouraged and invited, challenged to be sure, but with love and gentleness.

So, when Jesus says treat them like outsiders, he wasn’t saying turn your back on them. He was saying to change tactics. And all along, he was saying we ought to be doing this together. Reconciliation is a team effort, not an individual exercise. It is what we are about.

But we must ask, “Does this route through conflict to reconciliation have to do with the instructions for the Passover meal in Exodus?” Maybe not much, to be honest. But on the other hand, the call for a day of remembrance might be another key to understanding our role in dealing with conflict. First, the day invites the remembrance that ultimate protection comes not from our

power but from God. The family gathered around the table with the sacrificial lamb in the center is reminded that they did not have the power of life and death. That belonged to God alone.

Is that important? We might think it doesn't even need mentioning, but in the world in which we live, it is relevant and necessary for us to declare that conflicts are not to be resolved with violence on our part. Nor are we called to cast out, beat down, or oppress any enemy as unworthy of our attention and love. We are called by Christ, by the one who redeems, to lead with love, to stand against nationalism and white supremacy, to stand against any claims that place one group, one race, one class, or nationality above others. The Passover meal is a reminder of the abuses of nationalist power and the rescue that comes not from force of arms but from trust in the redemptive power of God. Conflict is meant to be resolved, not replaced with other conflicts. The sacrifice has been made; we remember and lead with grace.

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