

There is an old story about two men who lived in a small village. These two men got into a terrible dispute which they could not resolve. So, they decided to talk to the town sage. The first man went to the sage's home and told his version of what happened. When he finished, the sage said, "You're absolutely right." The next night, the second man called on the sage and told his side of the story. The sage responded, "You're absolutely right." Afterward, the sage's wife scolded her husband saying, "Those men told you two different stories and you told them they were absolutely right. That's impossible -- they can't both be absolutely right." The sage turned to his wife and said, "You're absolutely right."

While that story is rather humorous, it is descriptive of life within community when people don't want to face conflict. Too often, disagreements and differences just simmer below the surface and people are never honest with each other. And, as we think about life within the church, many people tend to think there should be no conflict within the faith community. However, Jesus' teaching in today's gospel lesson seems to proceed on the baseline assumption that conflict in Christian community is normal and natural, and should be dealt with honestly, with compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation. And, from Jesus' teaching today, we

discover the community of faith is **always** called to bear witness to the forgiveness and reconciliation Christ is bringing into the world.

Today's gospel reading has been a difficult passage to digest in the Western church. In the western world, we have been deeply influenced and shaped by the Enlightenment philosophy of John Locke, so much so that the dominant understanding of the local church in the modern world has been that of a voluntary association of autonomous individuals. This is especially the case in America, where individualism, with its emphasis on independence, self-reliance, and individual authority, is held in such high esteem. In our culture, church is often a place of self-sufficient individuals who gather for worship on Sunday, as their calendar permits, then leave to do their own thing throughout the week. But, at the time of the early church and in the community to which Matthew was writing, the faith community was a place of mutual interdependence, where each member was incomplete without the other, where the suffering of one was the suffering of all, and where the honor of one led to the rejoicing of all. This reading from Matthew assumes a close-knit community of committed people of faith. And, quite honestly, few churches today can claim that assumption as we live in an age of radical individualism.

So, as we approach this reading, we need to recognize these different cultural contexts. And, in a polarized society such as ours where we are often defined by our differences, in a climate of anger and violence, in a context of individualism run rampant, we must recognize that this gospel reading has tragically been used as a weapon to clobber others. Far too often this passage has been used to provide rules of engagement for combat rather than the rule of Christ to love, forgive and reconcile.

As we all know, honesty, forgiveness, compassion and reconciliation are all too rarely the watchwords of our church conflicts. Many times, anger, hurt feelings and lack of clear communication drive us toward either sweeping everything under the rug to keep peace, or openly hostile entrenched positions that lead to explosions with people permanently leaving the church. **But**, Jesus says there is another way.

First, he asks us to use **direct** and **respectful** communication. If we are struggling with something a church member has said or done, we are not to talk behind his or her back. Nor are we to stage a dramatic public confrontation at coffee hour. We are to take time aside, **after** the initial rush of emotion has subsided, and engage in dialogue with that person one-on-one. If that conversation is not fruitful, we create a small group of **all** parties involved to discern and pray together. If no progress is made,

then we let transparency be our guiding principle and search for a solution as a **whole** church community, bearing one another's burdens and seeking reconciliation. Now, as we are well aware, some disagreements are so deep that even these steps cannot ease them, and so Jesus says, "If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Well, with these words, we tend to breathe a sigh of relief. Too often, we simply shun and push aside the supposed troublemakers and make ourselves feel comfortable again. Hooray!

**No!!** That is **not** what Jesus is saying. We are **not** off the hook at all. Why? Because of how Jesus treated gentiles and tax collectors. What can we learn from his words and actions toward them that we can then apply to our fellow church members? When Jesus tells the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple, he emphasizes the Pharisee's grandstanding pride and self-satisfaction versus the tax collector's pained and private acknowledgement of his own sin. To treat a fellow church member like a tax collector would then be to realize that beneath the outer façade, that person might be hiding a great deal of pain and regret over his or her own actions in the conflict. Jesus says this tax collector went home justified and forgiven. Could we not look for the hidden self of the person with whom we are in conflict and have our

compassion awakened? Could we not realize that we ourselves might be in danger of praying like the Pharisee, proud and certain of our own righteousness?

Jesus treated reviled tax collectors and sinners with mercy, with invitation, with hospitality and with love. When Jesus tells us that we are to treat our most stubborn and contrary church members like tax collectors, he is telling us to treat them as he did, disciples who are God's beloved children. And, remember, Matthew himself was a tax collector!

And what about those despised gentiles, any of those we consider "other?" Well, again we can look at Jesus' example. One of Jesus' most famous encounters with a gentile was the healing of the despised Syrophenician woman's daughter. He initially refuses her request saying the food for the children of Israel cannot be given to the dogs. Her clever and persistent response, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table," convinces him to change his mind. Now, if Jesus, himself, can be persuaded to soften, become more understanding and change his mind about someone, can we not do the same? Jesus was not afraid to really listen and **be** changed by what he heard. **We have the opportunity to do the same!**

Jesus' instruction to treat those with whom we disagree as tax collectors and gentiles opens to us a whole array of creative and surprising paths toward reconciliation. All of this is so important not just because of the simple reality that there is no such thing as church without conflict. It matters because of how Jesus concludes his instructions saying, "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." How we choose to treat one another when the going gets rough has consequences that far outlast questions like the theology of sexuality or that knock-down drag-out fight over the carpet color in the narthex. We have the power to bind and loose. With our choices, we can bind each other even tighter into our separate camps and polarized positions, **or** we can loose ourselves from our pride and our ever-present need to be right. We can loose one another from assumptions and stereotypes and bitterness. And, we can do as St. Paul says and put on the Lord Jesus Christ. We can put on the clothes of Christ and be bound together with the unbreakable love of the crucified, risen Christ – a body tested, refined, healed and flourishing with new life.