

Sermon for Sunday, September 10, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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It's not exactly the gospel reading
I would have chosen
for the beginning of the new
program
year.

We're looking for something inspiring, something
that will remind us why we're here,
maybe refocus us in the midst of our busyness,
and get us excited
for the months ahead.

Or at the very least, with the extent of Hurricane Harvey's destruction slowly coming to
light,
and Hurricane Irma bearing down on Florida
with Jose and Katia close on its heels,
and then there's the sixteenth anniversary of 9/11 tomorrow,
and we just want a word of comfort.

But instead
the creators of the lectionary
and God in his own humor
have given us Jesus,
Jesus
talking about what to do with conflict.

And perhaps that is what we need today.
Because in the face of all the news that pending in on us,
it's easy to feel helpless.
Yet it's at times like these
that simply living out our faith in a practical way
day by day
is most important.

And in a faith where loving our neighbor
is one of the two great commandments,

how we deal with conflict
is an important part of that.

And of course conflict
is one of those things
which everyone knows exists, but no one really likes to talk about –
not openly, at least. It's hard to admit
that we're not perfect, hard to admit
that there are differences among us, some large, some small,
even harder to know
how we should deal with them.

So when today's gospel reading
focuses on what we as followers of Jesus should do
when we disagree
it comes as a bit of a surprise.
This is one of the times, and there aren't too many of them in the gospels, when Jesus
offers some really down to earth
practical advice
for how we as a church
should operate. He tells us nothing about finance, nothing about building maintenance,
nothing even about bishops, priests and deacons,
but the one thing he offers us some practical advice on, is what to do
when we disagree.

Because it happens.
More often
than we like
to admit.

Disagreements are part of life in the church.
They don't signal the end
of our relationships. They don't mean
we have to give up in frustration or disgust.
What they mean, is that we have to work all the harder
at what it means
to be members
of the body
of Christ.

Which is why Jesus thinks it's so important
to give us some guidelines
on what to do
when we as Christians, as members of the church,
as followers of Christ,
disagree.

First of all,
we should go, the very first thing, and talk with the person
we are having problems with.
That seems simple, it seems logical,
but we all know
how hard that is to do.
It's a whole lot easier
to go chat with some friends,
feel our way around.
And while sometimes that is helpful
as a way of checking out if we are being realistic, or just over-reacting,
more often it ends up
making things even messier.
Because we talk to a friend, and they get upset too, and then they tell someone else,
and so on,
until what was a simple issue of who should be responsible for buying the coffee cups
become a momentous issue of financial responsibility and trust, and next thing
people have left the church.
Now that might sound silly, but you who've been around churches for a while
probably know of things like that which have happened.
The psychologists talk about triangulation, getting caught in a triangle between people
who don't want to sort out their problem, or maybe are just too scared to do it, and so try
to get a third person as a kind of intermediary. The reason psychologists have a word for
it, is that it doesn't work, it just gets more people tangled up in the web of misery.
It's kind of related to gossip – its not that you necessarily mean anything bad to happen,
but as anyone who has ever tried to play that game of Chinese Whispers knows, you
know the one where you whisper a message in the ear of the person next to you, and so
on down the line, until the message that gets reported at the end is so different from the
original one that you can't imagine how it happened!

So, Jesus says, keep it simple. If you think someone has done something against you,
go, and tell them when the two of you are alone.
It may well be hard.

But if you never talk with that person directly,
how will they know that they have done whatever they have done? How will they know
not to do it again?

And most likely, they won't bite your head off, most likely
they'll listen to you, if you take things gently, and you can as two grown adults
sort things out.

It might take a while,
it might not be easy,
it might even mean giving a little on your side of things,
but in the end,
the disagreement will be dealt with,
and you will be able to rebuild your relationship and go on from there. And maybe even,
in a few months or years, look back and laugh about it all.

And it's only then, if that hasn't worked,
only after you've tried talking one-on-one and it's failed, Jesus says,
only then
get someone else involved.

Go find one or two others to go with you, and see if that changes things.

Elsewhere in the New Testament it suggests that those people should be elders,
people respected and given a role of leadership in the church.

I guess the closest we have here are the clergy, or perhaps wardens or vestry members.

Talk with a couple of others,

not just because as they say, misery likes company,
but with the intention of actually dealing with the issue.

In terms of the way we do things today, I guess you'd call those people mediators.

People who will help work out
what's really at stake.

People who will have the wisdom and experience
to help you work things out.

And then go with them

to talk with the person who you have the issue with.

And then, after you've tried all that,
then and only then, get the wider church involved.

Then and only then, after you've tried one-on-one, and after you've tried taking with you
a mediator or elder, take it to the church at large.

And we're still not talking about gossiping, trying to get other people on side.

Then and only then take it to the vestry, or other parishioners that you respect for their wisdom.

And together go talk with the person you have the issue with.

And if that person still won't listen,

won't be reconciled,

still keeps doing whatever they have been doing,

then

the church leadership

will take action,

and the person may

be asked to leave the church.

It's very rare

that things ever get that far.

It's happened once in my twenty years of ordained ministry.

The hope is, of course.

conflicts will get stopped

right back where they begin.

But Jesus is a realist. He knows

that sometimes, in spite of the best of intentions

relationships break down,

divisions creep into the church. But he wants to set out a way

that focuses on maintaining our individual relationships, and, if we follow it, at least

offers a chance of healing, a chance of hope.

And the reason it offers that healing and that hope

is not simply because it follows the rules of interpersonal relationships set out by the

psychologists, not just because it minimizes the negative talk and gossip. It's because at

the heart of it, at the heart of every relationship, every meeting between two Christians,

Christ is there with us. Whenever we come together, as followers of Christ, even

when we disagree, Christ is there with us. Christ is there, bringing us peace, when we

feel most peace-less, Christ is there, bringing us hope, when we feel most hope-less,

Christ is there, surrounding us with his love, when we are at our most unlovable.

And that goes for the person we disagree with, too. They too

experience the peace of Christ, they too

experience the hope of Christ,

they too, experience the embracing love of Christ.

Christ is on our side, and theirs as well,

because all God wants

is for us to love one another

as Christ loves us,
and to share that love with the world around us.

Because, Lord knows,
in the face of everything happening right now
 in the world around us
we need that love.