

“Where Is God in Our Conflicts?”  
Psalm 119:33-40; Romans 13:8-14;  
Matthew 18:15-20

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Sometimes we feel like a lot of things are pretty hypothetical. We are presented with some abstract ideas. Today, I think Jesus does the opposite. He gives us something very practical and very focused. As we begin to look at what he’s describing, let’s begin with those initial words. He says, “When a family member sins against you...” What he’s saying is that something has gone wrong between two people inside the family.

In fact, since that word “sin” is one that we often hear used in so many ways and is central to this passage, let’s take a little more time to think about it. The word that is used for “sin” in this passage comes from a Greek word. Let me give you this description. A couple of weeks ago I was with my nephews on an archery range. We had these nice round targets we were shooting at. Behind those targets was a stand of trees. But in between the targets and the woods, they had a strong, fine-mesh netting because if somebody missed the target, they didn’t want to have to go searching for the arrow. It made me think about this word “sin” because this is the Greek word they would have used for “missing the target.” In a time when archery was still around in more abundance than today, the word would have first conjured the idea of somebody missing the target.

When Jesus uses this word, in the way it is described to us here, it’s that idea of missing the target. It is missing the target so that the goal is not reached. I would suggest the goal is to have a good relationship, a healthy relationship, a right relationship, and somehow that’s been broken. So when somebody sins against you, it is probably pointing to some act that somebody has done—broken a trust, used the friendship in a way that wasn’t appropriate, done something to the relationship that has caused it to break down.

Jesus is talking very specifically here about the way we get along together. When something occurs that causes a rift, a break in our relationships, how do we solve that? Jesus calls us to love one another, yet we find that there are times where we struggle. So, he’s giving this pattern for us to use within the community of faith to go and talk to someone. If that doesn’t work, invite someone else to come and try to get some help in that conversation. And if that doesn’t work, involve the community. You are trying to restore a broken relationship, bring back a sense of shalom. It’s the idea of reconciliation and regaining that friendship, that relationship, that family member.

I’ve always thought of this as a very straightforward, very simple, reasonable way to go. It’s just hard as heck to do. If you have tried it, you might recognize that. And yet Jesus doesn’t say because it’s hard we shouldn’t do it. The easy thing seems to be to try to push somebody aside rather than make that effort.

As we look at this, we want to recognize that this is really mostly about two individuals. Jesus is describing a broken relationship between two people who are in a relationship because they are part of the same church, a gathering, a place. The people called out and gathered together because they follow him. He is inviting us to make sure we attempt that reconciliation and regain that relationship.

This is, I think, is mainly focused on those two people. But I think we can also learn from what he's doing here because he is providing a process. He is saying there are ways of trying to mend relationships and he is inviting us to do that, and do it in a fair way by having a conversation. The central piece to the process is listening, hearing and talking with one another.

Many years ago, I did some work on reconciliation, particularly reconciling arguments within churches. I went to a group that taught us how do that type of reconciliation. They suggested that oftentimes the main problem was that people had gotten their feelings hurt or hadn't felt like they had been heard, so they had a broken relationship. The way to solve that was, indeed, to bring people together and let them tell their stories, help them be heard, help people respond to that hearing and knowing. The process actually involved individual stories, maybe a few people gathered together, and maybe the whole church gathered together to encourage and support that reconciliation.

I think this process is a process that is inviting us to think about how we mend relationships, how we restore relationships, how we reconcile relationships, and I'm afraid that sometimes it has been used as a way of judgement or shunning rather than as a way of trying to bring people together to restore and retain and regain those relationships.

I think one of the issues is we sometimes look at what is said. If you can't make that final step, and sometimes we can't, there can be no resolution. There was a situation a long time ago where I went to talk to a pastor who had said something at a 4<sup>th</sup> of July community gathering that I felt like we needed to talk about because it didn't feel like he was treating somebody in the community well, and in fact was using that person. So, I thought it was time to have a conversation. It was one of those conversations where there was a sense that I was not being heard. There was no way that we were going to come to any kind of resolution. Sometimes that happens, and unfortunately sometimes that happens within our faith community.

Jesus acknowledges that sometimes we just have a hard time hearing each other, feeling like what is being said is real. We need to accept each other's feelings. Feelings are feelings, and sometimes we have a hard time accepting that. What Jesus says sometimes makes it feel like we're setting up that other for judgment. He says, "...then treat them as a Gentile and as a tax collector."

There are a couple of really interesting things here. We talked recently about crossing boundaries. Jesus crossed the boundaries with the Syrophenician woman,

who Matthew called a Canaanite, and healed her daughter. He doesn't see the Gentile boundary as one we can't cross. Paul gets sent to the Gentiles. I think what it means is that we begin to look at that person as somebody we *wish* we could have a relationship with. We *wish* the love of God could be there between us.

When he talks about Gentiles and tax collectors, it feels a little ironic that he is singling out tax collectors. Traditionally, the Book of Matthew is supposed to have been written by Matthew, the tax collector. So those reading this would see Matthew as one who would have known full well how much a tax collector needed the love and grace of God in his life. I think Jesus was inviting his followers to realize the struggle in our relationships and that you can't always have the relationship you want. But what does Jesus say? Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you. He continues to say this should be, as long as it's up to you, a relationship in which you try to love them.

This process is a process Jesus gives us so we can try to be fair to one another and engage with one another in attempting to overcome our differences, and perhaps, in doing so, show the world how to do that. Unfortunately, it feels all too often we as churches, as religious people, as followers of Jesus, don't show the world that reconciliation very well. We have too many divisions among us, and we struggle even within the family of faith. I just want to acknowledge that.

Then, there's one more piece to this that I want to think about. So often, when I get into an argument with someone, when I get on the outs with someone, that's the time when some of my bad behavior can come out. It's the time when I might want to say something that I shouldn't say. So, it is very interesting to me that at the very end of this passage is this phrase we use all the time to talk about how God is with us. I don't think that's wrong. I think Jesus suggests he is with us all the time through prayer and worship and all kinds of situations. But it's almost like in this particular situation where you have an argument, Jesus says, "I want to remind you that where two are three are gathered, I am there. When you are in the midst of that argument with someone else, I am there." If I were thinking that Jesus were present in the midst of my argument with somebody else, I'm sure I wouldn't say some of the things I might say otherwise.

It goes on to say, "...and whatever you agree on will be done." I think that's a poor translation. The word there is "begun." When you agree on something together, God begins something with you, and it is opened up. It is dynamic. It isn't over; it's a beginning. It's the beginning of restoring a relationship. It's the beginning of a life together. It's not something that is done. It's the beginning. It's God starting something and engaging with you and inviting you into that.

Mostly this is a description of a process by which Jesus invited us to work out conflict, particularly between individuals. But in it we can see things that are important in a wider way as well. We live in a time of division and conflict and violence. So how is this important to our time? What I would like to note is, one, that Jesus is expecting us to do this and model it to the rest of the world. As followers of Jesus, we are engaged in loving each other. We are encouraged to deal with our conflict in a way that tries to be fair and helps each other out and restores our relationships. It is something we might

do on a wider scale as well. The world might see if we would actually do it. We are invited to model it. We are invited to recognize that Jesus is trying to give us a way to be fair with one another. This idea of being fair with one another should permeate our lives, in everything we do.

Then, two, there is a focus on reconciliation and restoration. I don't think that is limited to our individual relationships, but goes with our family of faith, and goes with our community and the way we live in the world. There's that focus on talking with and hearing one another. It's interesting as he works through there he never says, "When that person finally agrees..." or "When that person sees what you are saying..." It simply says "When you know you are heard..." There's a way in which we have to make sure we hear one another and engage with one another.

Paul takes this another step and helps us see how this is engaging us in a wider world. For, in Romans, he is not talking about just inside the body. He says, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." That was Romans 12:17-18, which we read last week. As long as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. The goal he is giving us is to live peaceably with all. He is recognizing that not everybody will buy in. Our society may not see it the same way. But as much as we can, as followers of Jesus, we want to live peaceably with all. We certainly don't want to eradicate anybody, but live peaceably in relationship with everyone.

He goes on to say, "Love what is genuine. Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good." Notice he also said, "Do what is noble." We are to do what is noble. We don't devolve into calling people names or bearing false witness against others. What we see is that Paul has heard what Jesus is saying and is inviting us to recognize that not only in the individual relationships within our body but in the way we live in the world, it's there. What we want to remember, what is a central piece to me, and what struck me again and made me step back and think is that God is there in the midst of my relationships with others, when I engage somebody else.

Paul give us that list in Romans 13:13. Do you want to be one who shows debauchery and licentiousness? Licentiousness is not a word we use all that often. Behind it is a Greek word that means "violent spite which rejects restraint and indulges in standardless insolence." What a mouthful. He goes on: the spite of quarreling, the white-hot jealousy. Are these what we want to show in the presence of Christ when we are engaging with someone else or engaging with the world? Paul says no. We want to do what shows honor. We want to be doing what is noble in the sight of all. We want to be showing the grace of God, the love of God, the courage of Christ, and the hope we have in Christ.

So as God calls us together, recognizing that we will sometimes struggle and we will have to work through that conflict, he invites us to come and to join together at a table because we are a family of faith. He invites us to see what struggles I have with someone else before I come so I can get that solved, so I can work through it, so I can

come to the table and want to have everyone there experiencing the love of God in Jesus Christ.

As we go full-circle we recognize that God leads us into relationships with each other that aren't without struggles, but he invites us to work through them and to let this way of working things out spill out into the world in a way that helps the world deal with its conflicts and struggles. We are, indeed, enabled to be a family of faith that gathers around a table that we might be good news to the world we live in.

This morning I would like to conclude with a prayer—a prayer you may have already heard once today. Let's pray:

Lord, we live in a time of division, conflict, even shootings and beatings and killings. We wonder how to get along. We struggle even to talk with one another about our differences. We see violent clashes of those with differing views. Help us know how we might live in the midst of all this struggle. Help us when we have a hard time talking through our disagreements. Forgive how hard it is for us to bridge the gaps in our differing views and broken relationships. Let us have the spirit of Jesus. Let us put him on, that our lives might express the courage and the wisdom he showed. Remind us that we are not alone, that even in our attempts to work through hard times together you are with us. Help us use fair means of attempting to overcome our differences, our conflicts, and our rifts that we might mitigate the sin we perpetrate. Let us look with hope toward your love overcoming our sin. Amen.