

Jesus' Method of Conflict Management **(Matthew 18.15-20)**
by Rev. Durrell Watkins, Sunshine Cathedral September 7th, 2008

My great-aunt Gladys and her husband, my great uncle Arthur, had a huge party at my cousin's house for their 65th wedding anniversary. At the party, Aunt Gladys and Uncle Arthur were called up to cut their anniversary cake and pose for photographs. Suddenly Uncle Arthur got a horrified look on his face. He leaned over to Aunt Gladys and whispered, "Honey, I'm so embarrassed. I forgot to get you a gift." Always the poker player, my great-aunt's face never lost its gentle smile.

My cousin yelled out, "Uncle Arthur, say a couple of words about Aunt Gladys!" He sheepishly said, "Sweet and forgiving." The family applauded. Again my cousin yelled out, "Aunt Gladys, say a couple of words about Uncle Arthur." Without missing a beat, she said, "Cheap and stupid."

After the party, I tried to console my aunt. I said, "I'm sure Uncle Arthur feels just terrible. He'll rush out and get you something tomorrow I bet." She didn't care. She said, "I shouldn't be surprised. The man has always been inconsiderate and not very bright. He buys Dallas Cowboys Tickets 4 months in advance and does his Xmas shopping on December 24th."

"Once," Aunt Gladys continued, "as that idiot Arthur was coming out of the drug store going to his car, a man stole the car right in front of him. When the police got there they asked him if he saw the man's face. Arthur said, 'No, but I got a good look at the license plate.'"

Well, you get the idea. There was trouble in paradise. If Gladys and Arthur were better acquainted with the gospel of Matthew, they might have resolved some of their conflicts in healthier ways.

We're up to the 18th chapter of Matthew. Chapter 18 opens with Jesus' disciples being petty and self-centered. They said to Jesus, "in the Realm of heaven, who is the most important?" They were hoping he'd say one of them! But he doesn't, and indeed, for the rest of chapter 18 Jesus challenges the notion of self-importance.

We're trying to promote the sacred value of ALL people, and so that means one doesn't try to be more esteemed or more privileged or more entitled than others. Some may have more responsibilities, but we are all of equal importance. We are all in this together, helping one another be our best. If one of us falls, the others pick that person up. It's not about who will rise to the top; it's about trying not to leave anyone out!

And Jesus isn't suggesting a false modesty, nor is he telling us have poor self-images; on the contrary, the person who is comfortable with himself or herself and who is sure of his or her sacred value, doesn't need to lord power or privilege over others. The person who feels good about herself or himself seeks to have power with others, a just and fair sharing of resources, responsibilities, praise, and comfort. The person who is sure of her or his true divine nature can say, "let the last be first and the first be last."

By verse 10, Jesus tells that now familiar parable of the lost sheep. He says if a shepherd has 100 sheep and one wanders off, the shepherd will try to retrieve the lost sheep. You see, by itself, the wandering lamb is in danger. Wolves can attack it, or it might fall in a ditch and break its leg. But in the fold, with other sheep and the shepherds, the lamb is safer; her needs are more often met. It's not that the one lamb is more important than the other 99, nor is it that the 99 are more important than the one; the point is that all of them are better, safer, more content, living fuller lives when they share their lives together.

And that leads us to the passage we heard today, starting with verse 15. It's a continuation of the point Jesus is making from the beginning of chapter 18, isn't it? After making the point that we are better in community, in relationship, Jesus then tells us how to make our relationships work. He gives some concrete examples of how to be a faith community, growing, maturing and learning

how to live in right relationship. We aren't to struggle for power or importance, nor are we to ignore problems. We are to affirm all people, and hold all people to a standard of healthy behavior, behavior worthy of each person's sacred value.

First of all, notice that Jesus assumes there will be conflicts! This isn't his first time at the rodeo. He knows people get angry with one another, accidentally step on one another's toes, have honest disagreements. He doesn't say don't do that, because he knows it's inevitable. What he does, is tell us how to get past those rough spots so that we can return to the nurturing, safe, joyous, outreaching community we are meant to be.

And so, he says, if someone misbehaves, deal directly with that person about their offense. Don't spread a lot of gossip. Don't tell everyone how he or she is evil or no good. Don't try to create little internal wars. Just go to the person and try to work it out.

We are trying to have a positive experience, and as we grow in grace and hope and love, we have those gifts to offer others, and the world needs those gifts very badly. We don't have time for ill will, triangulation, backstabbing, sniper attacks, or toxic, negative attitudes.

When someone is doing that sort of unseemly stuff, we tell them. It may have become so habitual for them, they may not even realize they're doing it. It may be some defense technique they developed during a painful time in their lives. That doesn't make it acceptable, but we understand how it can happen. So we point it out to them, and we say that's not how we do things here.

What if that doesn't work? What if the person keeps sowing discord instead of trying to honestly solve problems in healthy and transparent ways? Then, it's time for a few people to get involved. Maybe a group of two or three can create a safe enough space for the issues to be discussed and resolved. Let two or three leaders tell the person, "Your behavior isn't appropriate and we're asking you now to play fair." It's OK to disagree, but we can do that without blaming, shaming, slandering, or attacking.

If having a small group confront the issue doesn't work, you may need a larger assembly...a staff meeting, a board, a committee. And if all attempts to help someone deal directly and play fairly fail, then you may have to sever your relationship with that person for awhile. That's what "treat that person as you would a tax collector" means. You may need to keep abusive or perpetually negative people at arm's length.

Now, that may seem harsh, but notice the severing of relationships doesn't happen until repeated attempts at healing and reconciliation have been made. And even after the relationship is severed, it can be restored. If the person later comes back and says, "Wow, I was really going through a bad time, and I regret how I behaved. I'm sorry;" Jesus says to forgive the person and start fresh! Peter asks Jesus later, "Should we forgive seven times?" Jesus answers, "More like seventy-seven times!"

Jesus is showing us the balance between accountability and grace, high expectations and forgiveness, demanding healthy behavior and offering ways of healing when the behavior isn't healthy. Try, try, try again, and if all attempts fail, sever the relationship...UNTIL the person takes responsibility and makes amends, then allow a fresh start and try again. It's not cutting people off without a chance, nor it is allowing any individual to behave in abusive ways. It is grace and love and accountability and responsibility all balanced in the way that is necessary for a community to function at its best.

St. Paul taught this same lesson. In Romans 13, verses 9-10, Paul says, "The commandments, 'Don't kill or steal or covet, and all the other commandments are summed up in this saying: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.'" When people behave unlovingly, we can lovingly offer to help them get back on track. If they repeatedly refuse our help, we may need to part company for awhile, but

when they are ready to come back, the doors are still open. It's a beautiful and empowering message for all of us.

Of course, Jesus is talking about relationships within the faith community, but this wise advice would be effective in the work place, in the home, in families, even in the community of nations. Wars would happen less frequently, if one nation would diplomatically approach its perceived enemy. If that didn't work, allies could be brought to the table to help work things out. If that didn't work, then a larger international body could be invited into the situation. And if nothing worked, then severing of relations and possible sanctions could be employed.

War then would only be a very last resort, and at anytime, if the enemy said, "I'm tired of being your enemy, can we now be friends," a new beginning would be possible. And then money spent on needless wars could be spent on ending hunger, treating AIDS, and addressing global warming. And people could die of old age instead of in their 20s on a battlefield. I don't know if this is the way favored by politicians, but it is the Jesus way. And as followers of Jesus, that may mean something to us.

This is the week of 9/11, a date burned into our communal memory. This is an election year where candidates snipe at each other in a contest for political leadership. And we are a community that has experienced conflicts with families of origin and our churches of the past. We are also a faith community, growing and learning to deal with a plethora of personalities and opinions. We aren't strangers to conflict, but Jesus says don't worry about conflict, just choose to address it in healthy and healing ways. And then he offers a promise...

Jesus says, if we'll learn how to address conflict appropriately, we'll remain a healthy, strong, loving community, and in such a community, when we pray together, wonderful things will happen in our lives. Creating healthy relationships invites the power of divine love into our midst, and with divine love, all things are possible. This is the good news. Amen.

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Divine Love harmonizes my relationships.
Divine Love guides my choices.
Divine Love energizes my body.
Divine Love prospers my life.
Divine Love blesses my loved ones.
With Divine Love, all things are possible.
I am glad and grateful!
And so it is!

Early in the 20th century, a minister named James E. Dodds said, "The law of the kingdom of heaven is peace and harmony, the very essence of graciousness...That is why the great men and women of all time have been gentle, gracious, and loving, though commanding persons...to be truly gentle is to be truly noble and able."