

The 14th Sunday after Pentecost
September 6, 2020
Matthew 18:15-20

Beloved: grace, mercy and peace be yours and mine from God and from our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have become fond of warning my colleagues and my children about the danger of confusing tragedy and disappointment. The civil wars that are on the cusp of destroying the Holy Land and Ethiopia are a tragedy; The Derecho that destroyed lives and livelihood across the Midwest and the forest fires threatening our siblings in California are a tragedy; the lives lost during the Covid Pandemic is a tragedy; not being able to get your Amazon deliveries on the timeline promised is a disappointment; being compelled to wear a mask in public is a disappointment, at best; our children not returning to in-person learning and business as usual is hard on the heart and not easy to bear, but if it keeps them and their teachers healthy until we're through the pandemic, it is a disappointment.

In our world, we confuse tragedy and disappointment. We react to tragedies with increasing numbness to our neighbor's needs and we approach disappointments ready to go for the jugular. It seems so out of proportion, so surreal, reminding me of my now sainted grandmother who gently chided me about World Hunger when I was a kid, throwing a tantrum in the store, because they were out of my favorite breakfast cereal and its promised prize.

Today's Gospel reading finds Jesus gently chiding us to remember how we should approach conflict, inviting our discernment and giving us concrete opportunities for how we might wade into reconciliation.

As I travel our synod, I am frequently invited to help mediate conflict. Inevitably, what typically happens when church folks disagree with each other, is that the one who is upset says nothing to the person who has caused the upset. But the angry person does talk to their friends and supporters and begins to gather sympathetic ears for a message that the other person has done the injured party wrong. Soon there is a large and growing group who know of the wrong done and they all begin to search their own memories for examples of when the person wronged them as well. Meanwhile, the person who is now being vilified and whose list of transgressions grows every day, has no idea that he or she has done anything to anyone. Then when the problem ultimately comes to a head, the original issue has either been completely forgotten or has morphed into something entirely different than the slight with which it began. Meanwhile, a sibling in Christ has been cast as a major villain, – simply from the power of bad feelings, innuendo and accusations, simmering over time.

Jesus lays out how these things might better be handled by a community. And it's not easy! Jesus demands that we should talk about things openly, honestly and directly, person-to-person; when we know it's easier to talk to our friends and to share our feelings and version of the events without the pesky interference of the accused, or God forbid, their perspective of what happened. Jesus suggests that those of us who have been hurt or wronged should summon the courage to

Speak directly to the one who hurt us, to lay things out as honestly as we can, with the irrepressible hope of having the issues worked out, of being reconciled.

Jesus doesn't say, "Ambush them." And neither does Jesus suggest that, "Meeting at high noon, in the middle of Main street and shooting it out. And may the best man win," such as the world seems to prefer.

Instead, Jesus challenges us to speak honestly and directly with each other, not in anger, but also not hiding the hurt that has been done. There is not to be a winner or loser, the goal is reconciliation; all of us returning, as much as is possible, to a place of shared care and concern – of forgiveness and understanding.

That's not always possible, for sure; and Jesus surely doesn't intend for us to be in a place where we are physically, spiritually or emotionally unsafe with someone who can leverage power or privilege to hurt or abuse us. This is not a plea to "forgive and forget" or to "let bygones be bygones," particularly when the hurt is egregious and wounding. No, this is more about the petty and minor slights that morph and take on a life of their own when open secrets divide the body of Christ and distract us from the work of being the church, together.

Sin has consequences. And those who hurt or abuse others must bear the consequences of their sin and not be offered expedient forgiveness or cheapened grace. Still, what Jesus offers is a pathway towards reconciliation and healing. The person who has sinned against another gets no free pass. And the one who has been sinned against gets their life back, no longer bound by anger and resentment.

C.S. Lewis in [The Great Divorce](#), describes Hell as a great, huge, dark place where there is no contact between people. Lewis says that Hell started out small, but people quarreled with one another and moved away from each other. Then there was another quarrel and the people moved farther away. And so on, and so on, until finally no one could even see anyone else. And there they lived, alone in the emptiness. That's what Jesus is challenging in today's Gospel.

Jesus says we should take our disagreements directly to those with whom we disagreed precisely because that is the opposite of Lewis' vision of Hell. As the beloved of God we are to love one another, and that requires courage and truth-telling.

In the midst of one of the most bruising election cycles in history, when untruth and half-truths are traded freely online, when close quarters and quarantining have worked our last nerves, while it becomes harder and harder to be heard, let alone get someone to listen, how are we being invited to be church for such a time as this? Reconciliation is not rainbows, kittens and unicorns – it's hard work. And the church has a high and particular calling to model that work of listening and truth-telling, as a means of transformation for the sake of a world that has slipped into the kind of Hell Lewis describes. It calls for discerning the difference between tragedy and disappointment, tamping down the latter so that we can respond together, credibly, to the former.

Beloved, a Christ stretched out his hands in love for us on the cross, we are challenged to reach out our hands to begin again the hard work of being reconciled with one another, challenged by a God who has reconciled all things in Jesus Christ. Amen.