

Year A

Proper 18

9.10.23

Sermon

[Jesus said,] For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

Amen

Good morning, St. Dunstan's!

When was the last time you took flew?

Some people love flying. Others are fearful. Then there is the gambit in-between. In my life, I have experienced all of these feelings.

Back in the day, one would dress up to fly and it was not something one did often, hardly ever.

I remember saying, "Yes! We are getting ready to take a trip and.... we are going to **F L Y!**"

Oooh/ Ahhhh was the usual response from my crowd of listeners, "you GET to fly? Lucky!"

It was a sheer privilege to embark on a **J E T**.

Flying now a days, it does get you there faster but there have been many changes within the airline industry.

One thing hasn't change, people still need to take with them... stuff.

Some call it baggage. While others call it luggage.

Today's Gospel reading finds us in the book of Matthew.

Matthew is broken down into 4 different parts.

with a prologue introducing the infancy narratives,

and the conclusion presenting the passion, resurrection, and commissioning narrative.

Today we will learn more about how to deal with community life especially in the way of dealing with conflicts.

We have experienced conflicts basically our entire lives.

Have you ever heard of the 'Toddler's Creed'?

The 'Toddler's Creed':

What mine is mine and what's yours is mine. Some adults live by this creed too.

The gospel of Matthew was the early church's favorite book.

How do we know this?

It was the most quoted, most copied, most read, and most preached Christian book of the early centuries.

If anyone knows about broken relationships and conflict within the community, it would be Matthew.

Matthew was a tax collector.

No Jewish mother is bragging around at the watering well telling her friends that her son just landed a job at the tax collector's office. Tax collectors were responsible for collecting tolls and taxes on behalf of the hated Roman government.

Tax collectors were responsible for paying to the Roman government revenues which they had promised by obtaining a contract.

AND the tax collectors were generally free to collect **extra** taxes from the people in order to make a profit.

Opportunities for **theft**-charging extra of their neighbors and friends, **fraud**- misrepresenting the truth, and **corruption**- abusing their power.

The position of a tax collector is portrayed negatively in almost all Greco-Roman literature along with the New Testament. In Judaism, tax collectors were seen as the worst sort of hardhearted traitor.

“Tax collectors and sinners- the harlots, gentiles,” are often cited together as examples of the extreme undesirable types. Not someone you want to bring to a family reunion.

Notice- tax collectors had their own classification beyond regular sinners.

Matthew is the only member of the twelve disciples or close friends of Jesus, linked with sinners through his role as tax collector. His inclusion among the twelve indicates that, especially for the readers of the Gospel of Matthew, sinners or people who make selfish choices- like you and me, can be healed which also means...forgiven.

Because Jesus is counter-cultural- the sinners and ‘tax collectors’ are people who Jesus chooses to restore or rebuild, and to be his friends. These folks were not the most popular people in society. They were broken just like us. They were people who were quite familiar with personal conflict.

Carrying around conflict is like carrying around all this baggage.

Because Jesus loves us, and knows human nature, he also wants for us to live lighter!

That's why in Matthew 18 ---Jesus gives instructions on how to deal with conflict especially within the community of people who worship God.

9:00 Service only:



Notice this photograph. The woman is smiling as she is pulling all these different suitcases full of who knows what. Picture of these suitcases as metaphors for past hurts, childhood wounds, misunderstandings, unspoken resentments, control issues. The friends standing behind her or smiling. Perhaps they are offering her some encouraging support but if you notice the woman is still alone and doing all the work. She continues to smile yet perhaps her heart is racing

because of all the interior work she continues to do pulling day after day. What would it look like if she could be free. Free of all that baggage.

Jesus gives particular instruction on how to live freer within community life of believers.

There is a need to recognize that there is conflict.

There are people who don't want to acknowledge conflicts exist, yet conflict corrodes community.

Conflict takes up space where peace could reside.

Confliction resolution is work. Some people think that this kind of 'work' is a bad, 4-letter word... but work is actually good for us. Especially when it makes us healthier.

Jesus speaks here not of honest differences of opinion but of a fellow Christian who "sins against you."

The word 'sin' isn't a word common in our vocabulary. I find it rather antiquated. Often when I see that word in scripture, I substitute with the more familiar word, one that I can relate to a whole lot more... the word ...selfishness. We, you, and I are quite selfish creatures.

One might deduce from v. 15, the word sin to mean any 'self-serving' behavior that breaks the unity of fellowship in Christ. When church members injure one another, it is not merely an individual personal offense: it is more of a theological matter, harming the entire community. Each step outlined by Jesus is to be undertaken in the **hope** of healing and restoration.

Scripture teaches us to respond to conflict with respect to the other person.

“If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell her or him—work it out between the two of you. If she/he listens, you’ve made a friend.

The first step in dealing with brothers or sisters whom you have a conflict is to go to them **in private** and explain to them the situation.

In Judaism, Matthew’s original audience, it was considered wrong for one person to publicly humiliate another.

Have you ever been in a public place when a parent was screaming at their kid, drawing unnecessary attention, and making the matters worse?

I know a few people who don’t mind being called out in public for mistakes. I admire they can shrug it off and consider it either a personal growth opportunity or they simply don’t care.

I am on the opposite end. Maybe you are too. Just the thought of being publicly humiliated makes my palms sweat and my anxiety rise. As a parent, disciplining my children when they were younger, I always made it a point to pull them aside- especially in public.

Jesus encourages us to talk one on one. If the person listens, the matter is settled.

Remember: the main objective of all of Jesus’ instructions here is the eventual **restoration** of the person or the relationship- not punishment.

Next,

If the one who has hurt you refuses to listen in private, the next step is to take two or three witnesses along to try to convince and prove to that person the wrong she or he have done. This instruction is based on the Hebrew Scripture found in the book of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 19:15, “You cannot convict anyone of a crime or sin on the word of one witness.

You need two or three witnesses to make a case.”.

The goal is always **forgiveness and restoration**.

What else can we conclude far from shunning people-

Jesus teaches to reach out in love with the offer of grace to restore what has been broken.

In our passage today, Jesus seems to assume that there will be conflict among his followers.

What makes us different from the culture around us is not whether or not we disagree or wound one another, because we as humans are going to hurt one another.

What makes us different as followers of Christ is how we address conflict and **choose to resolve** these conflicts with love, forgiveness and restoration being the focus.

I love how Jesus ends this dialogue. He reminds us of his presence no matter the situation.

Look at v. 20,

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

No doubt, conflicts are challenging.

Talking through conflicts can be uncomfortable yet if we push through with honesty and love, the reward of conflict resolution can make life better.

Remember at the beginning I mentioned airplanes-

When we enter into relationships within the Christian community, it’s kind of like when they close the door to the airplane:

Whether it is a smooth flight or turbulence, crying babies or a chatty seatmate- we are in this together for the entire ride... with **Jesus as our pilot**.

Can't you hear Jesus saying,

"Good morning, ladies, and gentlemen. I'm so glad you have chosen to fly with me today. We may experience some bumpy weather, but I want to encourage you that I have everything under control."

This message was intended to release the people of God from the spiritual burdens they had been carrying for years.