

Title: We Can Work It Out

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, never let us forget that we are commended to love and that part of love is reconciliation and forgiveness; give us the strength to see past our differences and to see how we can work together, in Christ Jesus through whom we pray. Amen.

King Duncan shares this story: “There was a church where the pastor and the minister of music were not getting along. As time went by, this began to spill over into the worship service.

“The first week the pastor preached on commitment and how we all should dedicate ourselves to the service of God. The music director led the song, ‘I Shall Not Be Moved.’

“The second week the pastor preached on tithing and how we all should gladly give to the work of the Lord. The director led the song, ‘Jesus Paid It All.’

“The third week the pastor preached on gossiping and how we should all watch our tongues. The music director led the song, ‘I Love to Tell the Story.’

“With all this going on, the pastor became very disgusted over the situation and the following Sunday told the congregation that he was considering resigning. The musician led the song, ‘Oh Why Not Tonight?’

As it came to pass, the pastor did indeed resign. The next week he informed the church that it was Jesus who led him there and it was Jesus who was taking him away. The music leader led the song, ‘What a Friend We Have in Jesus.’

Though this is an extreme example, no relationship exists in the long term without conflict. Even people who generally see eye-to-eye will not agree on everything. This why stereotypes do not work. Even people in the same political party do not always get along.

Jesus promised that when two or three are gathered together in Jesus' name, he will be in the midst of them. When I hear a complaint that there is too much politics in the church or another organization, my stock reply is, "Whenever two or three are gathered together, there is politics."

Human beings are political animals. These days when we hear the word political, we hear it used as a pejorative, as something negative. Politics is not a bad word or activity. It is how human beings organize themselves to accomplish tasks. As an example, there are few organizations that are not run by Robert's Rules of Order, or some variation of that.

Politics govern how we can come to an agreement to do something and how the task can be accomplished. Politics also recognizes that people have different opinions and that those opinions are to be honored and heard.

Jesus knew this too. Jesus also knew that even good people can harm others. We can say the wrong thing. Our actions may hurt someone. So, Jesus offers a system for conflict management.

If a church member harms you, you are to talk to the person confidentially. It is possible that other person was unaware of the harm that was done to you. By talking confidentially to each other, a resolution can hopefully be reached. The desired outcome is contrition and forgiveness. It is in mutual forgiveness and love that the church can continue its mission.

Of course, it is possible that the person disagrees that that person owns the fault and may even think that you are at fault. It is also possible that a church member can be obstinate. *Imagine*. If the private meeting does not yield reconciliation, then Jesus suggests that you take one or two others with you who can act as witnesses.

If the person still does not conform, then the next level, according to Jesus, is to take your case to the church. If the church does not convince the person to conform, then they are to be as a gentile and a tax collector. Of course, it might be possible that the church would rule in favor of your opponent.

Now as a gentile, I'm not sure if I should take offense to what Jesus said. What's wrong with being a gentile? The Archdeacon of the diocese is a

retired IRS employee. I think she is a very fine person. What's wrong with being a tax collector?

The problem is that Jesus wasn't initially addressing us. He was talking to his disciples, who were first century Jews, living under Roman occupation. So, what does Jesus mean by referring to someone as a gentile. Gentiles were welcome to attend synagogue services but they were not included as members. So, if one were to be like a gentile, they would no longer be members of the church.

Jesus ate with tax collectors, for which, he was criticized by the religious authorities. Matthew was a tax collector. Jesus thought Matthew must have been a fine individual. Tax collectors were seen as the worst individuals, almost as bad as Samaritans, because they often cheated people and they were seen as agents of the occupying army. Jewish tax collectors were not welcome in synagogues or in social circles. Basically, Jesus is advocating shunning as punishment.

To make the punishment even more daunting, Jesus says that whatever is bound or loosed on earth is also bound or loosed in heaven. If one is forgiven on earth, that one is forgiven in heaven. If one is shunned on earth, that one is shunned in heaven.

This is powerful. It has, also, been used as a weapon, oftentimes, inappropriately. The church has used this admonition to make people conform to what the clergy believe to be in their best self-interest. The problem is a misuse of power.

I think Jesus was aware of the dangers of this power. Jesus adds two conditions to this power that were often overlooked by the people trying to wield it. The first condition is that there be two in agreement, though I suppose more than two would be better. It's these two who are necessary for any loosening or binding to be done. One person cannot do this. Jesus doesn't seem to allow for two opposing sides with two people each binding one another. I think at this point, Jesus is assuming that the church is in unanimity. When has the church ever been in unanimity?

The other condition Jesus imposes is that when two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, Jesus is there. So, when there is all this binding and loosening

going on those two or three are to remember that Jesus is also there. If Jesus is there, I would assume that Jesus is involved with the decision.

What might Jesus say in these circumstances? I think Jesus would remind the two or three that the two greatest commandments are about love. Any binding or loosening must be about love.

The question before a decision is made is, “Is this going to be a loving act?” We can evaluate that with our God-given intellect. And we must also consult God, listening to the ever-present Jesus, through the Holy Spirit. This can only be done in prayer.

Jesus is concerned with the integrity of the church. Any church condoning a grievous sin would be seen as hypocritical and would lose any moral authority. And if one church were so impoverished then all churches would be painted with the same brush. And already have. The church, in general, has sustained many scandals and they have hurt all churches.

Jesus’ main concern is reconciliation. When one sins, it often infects the church. It may be noticeable or it may not be obvious, because it is so subtle. It is the duty of the church to reflect Jesus’ teachings of love and harmony. We are to be the bastions of how God wants the world to be. But because we are human, our interactions may create conflict.

Most of us are familiar with the Serenity Prayer of the twelve-step healing process. It fits the context of this topic: “God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Text: **Matthew 18:15–20** (NRSV)

¹⁵“If another member of the church^d sins against you,^e go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.^f
¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in

^d Gk *If your brother*#

^e Other ancient authorities lack *against you*

^f Gk *the brother*

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heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” ¹

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Mt 18:15–20). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.