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**Matthew 18:15-20** If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 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 heaven. 19Again, 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. 20For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

### **CONFLICT!! A Test of Love**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Conflict!! O dear. Do we really want to hear about conflict and fighting today? We hear about it all week on the news. Why don't we hear about Labor Day? Well, yes, there's that, but there's conflict in the church, too, you know. And we all know about the conflict within our family circle. How do we handle that? Are we any good at conflict resolution? I took a look into my files from when I was active as a counseling psychologist and I found a 3-step conflict resolution guide, a 4-step, and a 5-step. I used each of them many times. Conflict is real wherever people come together and try to organize themselves. Let's look at two places today where conflict happens and see what our Lord has for us by way of wisdom for conflict resolution and reconciliation. I'm thinking of, 1) a congregation and 2) a family.

### **So Part I (of two parts) Is About Conflict and Our Self-centeredness.**

Let's look first at our Gospel text in its context.

Matthew, by the way, is the only evangelist who quotes these words of our Lord Jesus about how to resolve situations which lead to conflict.

And it's important to know that he places them right after the well known parable of the lost sheep.

You remember how that goes: A shepherd has a hundred sheep -- one is lost -- he leaves the 99 and goes in search of the lost sheep. And when he finds it he rejoices over it more than over the 99 who never went lost. And then Jesus says, v. 14, "**So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.**"

It's clear that our Lord's next words -- v. 15, "**If another member of the church sins against you ...**" (what has been called "Church Discipline") are said in the context of finding and saving the lost.

And that leads to my first point in part 1 --

#### **1. All of us are so lost in self that we do not want to hear our "fault."**

I believe that's because we are all lost sheep.

Notice, Jesus said, "... go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. **If the member listens to you,....**" Now we all know that can be a big "**IF.**"

We become defensive when accused of "fault" -- which equals "sin."

Then our ears quit working -- we refuse to listen, we refuse to be open to the one who confronts us, love flies away and we fail the test of love.

That happens in our church life -- it can happen in our families.

Take the case of a married couple -- here's a Sunday comic strip to illustrate this.

Sally Forth and her husband, Ted, are doing the dishes together. Sally says, "There's something weighing on me, Ted." Ted, (looking apprehensive) "What's wrong?"

Next frame -- Sally: "You men always want to rush the process."

Ted: "There's a process?"

Next frame -- Sally: "First I give you some obscure hint that you miss entirely. Then I expect you to read my mind."

Next frame -- Sally: "Your inability to read my mind causes a small tiff. After we make up, I finally tell you what's weighing on me."

Ted: "Wouldn't it be easier if you just told me that at the start?"

Next frame -- Sally: "Then you wouldn't get a chance to show me you love me by reading my mind."

Ted: "Can't I show you that by getting your car washed?"

Next frame -- Sally: "It's not the same."

Final frame -- Ted: "Can you at least warn me when the hint's on its way, or did I miss it already?" *[Sally Forth, by Greg Howard, Sac'to BEE, 2.9.1997]*

Well, what do you think? Did they resolve their conflict? Was it a good process? I did notice that love came into the discussion, so we can say that this was "a test of love," can't we?

Were they listening to each other?

Perhaps the Word of Jesus can come true, "**If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.**" Forgiveness and reconciliation! What a joy!

Now when the problem is in the congregation, we should take note of an interesting development in the Greek underlying this passage.

In v. 15, "**If another member of the church sins against you, ...**" the words "against you" are not found in the oldest Greek copies of this Gospel -- copies which were found after the King James Bible was translated, for instance.

Thus in the most recent translations, based on the best Greek manuscripts, this reads, "**If another member of the church sins, go and point out the fault ....**"

This now means that not just a person sinned against, but anyone in the congregation who is aware of a "fault" may be designated to point things out to a member.

This meaning fits well with our Lord's story of the lost sheep, doesn't it -- we are all to be concerned with sheep who may be straying away from our congregational family.

Do I really need a **point 2** in this Part I about our self-centeredness?

If I do it would be about **the hardening heart of any self-justifying, ego-saving, stubborn member** of a church or a family who just will not be reconciled.

Or it would be about those of us who don't have the courage to confront sin.

Two or three others, who will serve not only as witnesses but also as encouragers, can be brought into the picture.

The matter may even have to be told to the congregation, that is, to its spiritual leaders, both clergy and laity.

And if all fails, then the one who refuses to repent must be put out of the church, put out of the family -- sad, sad situation.

It takes real courage and true love to follow this 3-step conflict resolution model outlined by our Savior -- finally declaring someone to be "as a **Gentile and a tax collector.**" ***An outsider to the company of the saved!***

But there IS good news in part II where we learn that our Lord Christ is in our midst!

## **Part II. Jesus Christ the Outsider Is Present When We Gather in His Name**

Our Gospel reads, v.20, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

**Well then, Point 1, How is He an Outsider?**

1) In two ways: as we confess in our Apostles' Creed today, "**I believe in Jesus Christ His [the Father's] only Son, our Lord ... born of the virgin Mary.**"

He left His place at the right hand of power, He entered our time/space universe from the outside, and, as St. Paul writes to the Philippians, ch. 2, He "**emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, ... and being found in human form He humbled Himself.**" [vv. 7-8a]

He had no home, no property except the clothes upon His back, no chariot, no credit card, an itinerant rabbi, outside the halls of heaven, here as an Outsider.

2) The second way He is an Outsider: when finally captured by the religious establishment, He was forsaken by His followers, treated to a mockery of a trial, led upon the Via Dolorosa outside the city of Jerusalem, and there nailed to a cross. Worst of all He was forsaken on that cross by His Heavenly Father upon Whom He had counted -- Jesus Christ became the ultimate Outsider.

In all of this He showed His love for us, for you and me.  
By our faith in Him and His atoning sacrifice we are brought into the fellowship, into the communion, of Holy Church, and here when we gather, He comes among us. Here in this church we congregate as His family -- yes, we come from all points of the compass to find our way here each sabbath. From our scattered-ness during the days of the week we are drawn together to celebrate our salvation, to be strengthened by Word and Sacrament.

**And here in this place, Point 2, We are freed from our self-centeredness so we can now love as He did.**

Resolving conflicts which arise anywhere in our lives as Christians is a test of love. But we must be clear about that kind of love.

St. Paul writes to the Romans in today's second reading, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ... 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" [v. 8]

Paul, for the word 'love' uses the Greek word "AGAPE" which of course is not ordinary "man-woman" love, nor friend to friend love, and not even father-child love.

The best definition of 'AGAPE-LOVE' I've found is this: "Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth."

I found that in Scott Peck's 1978 book, The Road Less Travelled [Simon & Schuster: New York, p. 81] -- Dr. Peck was a psychiatrist who became a Christian in his 40's.

Let me repeat, "Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth."

So this love is not some adolescent feelings -- it is the use of our will, first of all.

Now some say we have 'free will,' but the Lutheran Confessions remind us that:

*"...man possesses some measure of freedom of the will which enables him to live an outwardly honorable life ... but without the grace, help, and activity of the Holy Spirit man is not capable of ... fearing God and believing in God ...."* [Augsburg Confession, Article XVIII]

Therefore this 'will to extend one's self', to put ourselves out, to go the extra mile, is a gift from above by which we are enabled to forgive and to reconcile.

Do you realize that our Lord Jesus gives us permission to love ourselves? We are free to extend ourselves in order to nurture our own spiritual growth, yes, indeed: "Love your neighbor as yourself." There it is: 'as [you love] yourself' -- Our Lord said it! And when we do nurture our own spirituality, our own faith, we are more and more able to extend ourselves on behalf of another's spiritual growth.

And that's point 2 -- that's how we are freed from self-centeredness -- we drink deeply at the fountain of God's love in Christ Jesus as we gather here Sunday by Sunday, and our lives are changed -- we can focus outward -- we can extend ourselves -- we can forgive and be forgiven.

**Conclusion:** Conflict, arising from our 'faults' will occur in the congregation, in our family. Conflicts need to be resolved -- sins need to be forgiven.

Self-centered as we are -- lost sheep as we are -- we need help from outside us to be freed from guilt and reconciled with one another.

Our Saviour, Jesus the Christ, the ultimate Outsider, came and brought that help. Let us love as He first loved us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.