

Sermon for September 6th, 2020
Matthew 18: 15-20

The lion and calf will lie down together, but the calf won't get much sleep.
So said Woody Allen once.

The bible speaks to peace and reconciliation throughout its many and varied texts. Even in today's passage we hear, on the face of it, instructions for how to find that peace in the midst of a conflict in the community.

I say, "on the face of it" because rarely does Jesus speak words that have only one obvious meaning.

To say conflict is a part of our world seems like an understatement at the moment.

Tens of thousands march through the streets of Minsk in Belarus protesting against a corrupt government for almost a month now.

Tens of thousands march through American streets protesting against racial injustice, inequality, brutality.

Conflict not only exists in our world, it seems to be thriving.

And we, as people of faith, hold this to be true: that is, creation bends towards redemption. Creation bends towards reconciliation. This is the God-Spirit in all of creation working towards the whole point of creation. Forgiveness, connection, relationship, love.

Not 'hallmark card love'. Not the kind of love that makes you feel sweet and mushy inside.

We are talking about the love that pulls two people together despite all their differences. We are talking about the love that ruthlessly pursues healing, even at the cost of propriety and right religiosity. We are talking about the love that makes us weep, wrings out our soul, leaves us breathless and then holds us as we sleep in the peace that surpasses our paltry understanding.

The first thing to note about this passage is that this is about addressing known sin.

And there are times that it is as simple and straightforward as the one who has been sinned against confronting the one who did the sinning. Repentance is sought, repentance is received. The lion and the calf lie down and both can sleep peacefully.

But what about when it isn't that straightforward, that easy. What about the rest of the time, which often seems like most of the time?

How do we do that in a world when the "wrong" that has been done has been by a few (the powerful) against the many - the tens of thousands? And even when they protest, little to nothing changes?

What do we do in a world where those who have been harmed (or are being harmed) have no voice - no opportunity to go to the one who is harming them and confront them?

Well, Jesus tells us, to take others with us and confront the person (or system, or group) perpetuating the harm. In other words, if your voice alone cannot resolve the situation, more voices are needed. And this is where the church comes in. There are no bystanders in the church. At least, there shouldn't be.

It is important for us to remember the context this teaching shows up in. Just prior to this passage Jesus has taught that children are valuable (an

idea antithetical to the time) and that one stray sheep is worth risking life and limb to retrieve, despite 99 healthy happy sheep in the flock (an idea antithetical to smart shepherding).

The rules and etiquette for getting along in the time of Jesus (and I would argue, in our own time as well), very much depended on who had power. Power might come to you in the form of wealth, political position, the station in life you were born into, whether or not you are a woman or a man. What Jesus is promoting in this passage is equality and justice for all. It would be unheard of in Jesus time for a woman to go to a man in her community and accuse him of anything. The same would be true of a peasant farmer accusing a wealthy merchant. To add insult to injury, Jesus proposes that the person who has been wronged show up with a posse of witnesses.

Following on the heels of Jesus teaching about the “little ones”, that is children, Jesus is making the case for the least amongst us. The disempowered, disenfranchised. Those who are legally, economically, politically worthless.

In this context, the passage we read today is not so much a “process by which to work out your complaints” as it is an opportunity for those who have been “harmed” in the community to find their voice. A voice that they perhaps did not have in that particular culture, time, and religious structure. It is about finding a process to bring about equality and justice.

“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.”

When one voice is not heard, bring other voices into the telling.

Who are these other voices? Sisters and brothers in the community and witnesses to what has unfolded. In other words, you and me.

I ask us all to consider how we participate as sisters and brothers to others in our world who are victims of corrupt political systems, economies that value profit over humanity and choose who is in and who is out based on what their body may or may not have.

The last admonishment is the one that is perhaps the most challenging.

“And if that doesn’t work, then treat them like tax collectors and Gentiles.”

At first glance this might lead us to believe that we are to treat them as outsiders, cast them away, treat them as despised. Wasn’t that how tax collectors and gentiles were treated in Jesus time?

Remember though that we are reading, as the first readers were as well, a gospel written as the young Christian church is being established - with gentiles and redeemed tax collectors in the mix. In fact, the gospel is named for the disciple Matthew, a tax collector himself, called to follow Jesus.

And so the admonition is to treat an unrepentant soul as a soul that can and hopefully will repent, will one day be welcomed into the kingdom.

Creation bends towards healing, reconciliation, redemption, forgiveness.

Jesus bends us as communities as individuals to do absolutely everything possible make that happen.

To stand with those who have no voice and amplify their voice so their story can be heard, so their justice can “roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24)

And then to pursue and embrace the ones who have committed the harm, the sin. To bring them into the fold so that they too can be redeemed,

turned away from corrupt power and greed and anger towards that love that will bring them life as well.

Imagine such a kingdom. Where there is peace and reconciliation between all. It sounds as crazy as calves and lions sleeping together peacefully. And yet it is a dream we are called to pray for and to seek by our own actions. May it be so in our time and in this place. Amen