

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
RESOLVING CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH: Matthew 18:15-20 (September 6, 2020)

Although this passage in today's Gospel of Matthew might certainly not be word for word report of what Jesus said, it is equally certain that it goes back to something he did say. Can we press behind it and come to the actual commandment of Jesus? At its widest what Jesus was saying was, "*If anyone sins against you, spare no effort to make that person admit his/her fault, and to get things right again between you and him/her*".

Basically it means that *we must never tolerate any situation in which there is a breach of personal relationships between us and another member of the Christian community.*

Suppose something does go wrong, as it certainly will happen because we are human, what are we to do to put it right? This passage presents us with a whole scheme of action for the mending of broken relationships within the Christian fellowship.

{I} If we feel that someone has wronged us, we should immediately put our complaint into words. The worst thing that we can do about a wrong is to brood about it. There are so many times when we just must not suffer our hurt in a sort of brooding silence. That's the worst thing we can do. The first rule that Jesus gives us to resolve conflict is: **tell it, speak it, get it out into the open.**

{II} If we feel that someone has wronged us, we should go to see him personally. More trouble has been caused by the writing of letters than by almost anything else. A letter may be misread and misunderstood; it may quite unconsciously convey a tone it was never meant to convey. **If we have a difference with someone, there is only one way to settle it—and that is face to face.** Jesus says to go personally and He adds this, "*If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.*" That's a beautiful picture! We make the effort take the first step - go in Christian love and there is a bonus in it for us! We have a brother or sister! Those with whom we have struggled and resolved conflict become the most precious of all to us. **The first step Jesus advised is to tell them. The second is to go personally.**

{III} If a private and personal meeting fails then Jesus suggests a third option. He suggests that we should take some wise person or persons {Witnesses} with us. A man often hates those whom he has injured most of all; and it may well be that nothing we can say can win him back. But to talk matters over with some wise and kindly and gracious people present is to create a new atmosphere in which there is at least a chance that we should see ourselves "as others see us."

{IV}. If that third option still fails, we must take our personal troubles to the Christian fellowship. **Why?** Because troubles are never settled by going to law, or by Christ-less argument: "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." So that's the fourth step, **tell it to the church.** The fifth follows right afterward "... if he refuses to listen even to the church, *let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector*" (Matthew 18:17).

{V}. The advice to treat him as a Gentile and a tax collector seems like very tough advice from Jesus. If you don't succeed, Jesus advises to treat the person as a Gentile and tax collector. The first impression here is to give up and treat the person as hopeless and abandon him or her as irreclaimable. However, Jesus never set limits to human forgiveness. Remember what he told Peter? We must forgive seventy times seven. William Barclay reminds us in his commentary that *when Jesus spoke of Gentiles and tax collectors, he always did so with sympathy and gentleness with an appreciation of their good qualities.* "It may be that Jesus was saying something like this: 'When you have done all this, when you have given the sinner every chance, and when he remains stubborn, you may think he is no better than a tax collector and Gentile. Well, you may be right. But I have not found tax collectors and Gentiles hopeless. My experience of them is that they, too, have a heart that can be touched, and there are many of them like Matthew and Zacchaeus, who have become my best friends. Even if the person is like a tax collector and Gentile you can still win him, as I have done.' " **So this Scripture does not say to give up.** In fact, it challenges us to win the heart - the

hardest heart! It is not a statement that some men are hopeless; **it is a statement that Jesus Christ has found no person hopeless—neither must we.** To sum up that fifth option is to tell us; “Double your effort.” **HAPPY LABOR DAY WEEKEND. Our unique American end-of-summer holiday that celebrates work by not working. Wonderful!**

Most of the world observes May 1st as Labor Day, but not us. The September date was chosen way back when because it was halfway **between the 4th of July and Thanksgiving. September 5, 1882 saw the first American Labor Day parade.** It was held in New York City with 20,000 participants carrying banners calling for 8 hours for work, 8 hours for rest, 8 hours for recreation. Samuel Gompers, the founder and longtime president of the American Federation of Labor said of Labor Day: *“It differs in every essential from the other holidays of the year in any country. All other holidays are in a more or less degree connected with conflicts and battles of man's prowess over man, of strife and discord for greed and power, of glories achieved by one nation over another. Labor Day...is devoted to no man, living or dead, to no sect, race, or nation”.*

There are three biblical principles regarding work: FIRST, JOB SATISFACTION IS A GIFT FROM GOD. Some ancient, inspired Jewish teacher declared this truth four centuries before Christ. Hear his words from Ecclesiastes 5: “All to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil – this is the gift from God.”

THE SECOND BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE REGARDING WORK: OUR WORK IS AN ADVERTISEMENT FOR OUR LORD. St. Paul expressed this truth in his letter to the Colossians: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for your bosses.” (Colossians 3: 23) Your ultimate boss is never another person. You work for yourself and your God. If you can wax a floor well, the shine on that floor declares the glory of God and puts in a good word for you, too. How good it is if we can put our heads on the pillow most nights, saying prayerfully, “Lord, with your help, I gave a pretty good account of myself today; I did my work with a touch of class.” Think about it...when people watch you do your job, do they have reason to think more highly of your God?

THE THIRD BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE ABOUT WORK IS THIS: OUR WORTH IS BASED ON WHO WE ARE, NOT ON WHAT WE DO. One of my favorite Bible verses is Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the results of works, so that no one may boast.” One of the messages of that verse is that our worth before God would be exactly the same even if we were to be unemployed. Our value was secured by what Jesus Christ did on a cross; it is not affected by how much or how little we do.

This weekend is a wonderful time to celebrate work, whether you do it for pay or as a volunteer. If you're in a slot God intends for your, then enjoy the job satisfaction God gives. The quality of our work is an advertisement of our God, so let's do it with a touch of class. And remember, we are more than laborers. We are children of the King of kings whose love for us does not drop an iota when we clock out of work.

A certain nurse won the admiration of her little Appalachian mountain community with her patience, her cheerfulness, and her genuine concern for others. Her salary was inadequate by any standard. One day a physician said to her, “Joan, why don't you get out of this backward little community and go where they will pay you a decent salary. God knows you are worth it.” With a smile she answered, “If God knows I am worth it, that's all that matters to me.”