Matthew 18:10-20 Conduct (Un)becoming

I heard of a teacher recently who, having taken a number of students to visit Question Time in parliament, decided never to do so again. He felt that what they had witnessed that day between members of parliament was more negative than positive. There had been interruptions to speakers, raised voices, name calling and hot tempers. Certainly not the sort of role models he was seeking for his students.

Whenever conflict arises, the mantra of the world seems to be, “win at all costs!” It is a most destructive mantra. It’s what keeps divorce & litigation lawyers so comfortably employed. It’s not only our parliamentarians who would benefit from a closer look at today’s Gospel reading from Matthew!

In this chapter, Jesus speaks to his followers about the godly way to resolve conflict. What Jesus teaches reveals a principle which governs all conflict, however in this passage, it is a particular kind of conflict that he is referring to in the first instance.

Jesus is referring to is the conflict that arises when one believer wrongs another. The Good News translation of v15 says: "If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back.”

Some points of clarification:

First of all ‘brother’ here means brother & sister of course, and is referring to people of the same faith or belief. It’s not the same word as a ‘neighbour’ which in Jewish thinking was someone of simply the same nationality. This passage is addressing people who share the close relationship that exists between members of the same family of faith, where God is their Father. So first of all, Jesus is talking to people within the Church.

Secondly, Jesus is referring here to conflict that arises because one believer has sinned against another believer; in other words, when someone has done something immoral, unjust, or ungodly, which has hurt or damaged another person. Some examples might be having an affair with the spouse of someone in the congregation; it might be cheating someone out of something or theft; it might be libellous or malicious gossip, which is untrue: so, something which is immoral, unjust or ungodly in their treatment of another believer.

Unfortunately, this passage is often incorrectly viewed as justification for Christians to confront someone whom they simply disagree with, or disapprove of. More than once I’ve seen people criticising, even demolishing, someone else whose ideas or behaviour they don’t approve of, then justify it by saying, “The scripture says I should confront you about this, so I’m just saying this in love.”

This particular passage has nothing to do with confronting someone you simply disagree with or disapprove of. That’s setting yourself up in judgement over them. It is about going to someone who has sinned against you, and hurt you deeply. It’s about going to them to bring about reconciliation and forgiveness.

When there is a rift between believers because of sin, Jesus teaches that the person who has been sinned against should initiate the reconciliation process. Now that’s not easy to do. Most of us when we’re hurt do not feel particularly confrontational. But the other alternative of course would be for the wounded person to wait till the offender saw the error of their ways and repented – but that might be a long time coming, if it comes at all!

So Jesus is saying, “Has someone wronged you? Is there a rift between you and another person because of what that person has done to you? Then do something about it.” The goal is to bring about forgiveness and reconciliation, and restore an erring believer to fellowship.

With that in mind, we find Jesus gives us three simple guidelines to seek to restore fellowship with another believer.

1. **Jesus says to go to the offender in person, and in private.**

 To go in person is very important. William Barclay in his Bible Study notes on this passage says this: “**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.”**

So true. Emails & texts are just as bad. I might add that asking a third party to convey our message to a person who has wronged us is just as bad. We need to speak to the offender in person.

It also needs to be in private. This preserves confidentiality. And sometimes – just sometimes – a person may not realise what their actions have done to hurt another person. All it may take to restore a relationship is for the wounded person to take the offender aside and say, “You really did some damage, you know, when you did so and so.” The offender may then be able to say, “I’m so sorry – I won’t do it again. Forgive me?” – and you have restored a relationship without angst, and without fanfares.

However, most of the time, intentional sin is a harder nut to crack. For instance, if a church member were to an affair with another. It does happen, you know.

Many years ago, before I was in ministry, I got to know a single woman who was a lay church worker. She worked closely with the pastor of her church, and before long, their closeness developed into a full on affair. The tragic thing was that both the woman and the pastor had convinced themselves that their relationship was ‘God’s will’, and that the pastor had actually made a mistake in marrying his wife. Despite the counsel they received, he ended up divorcing his wife and marrying the woman. It’s in situations like this that going to someone privately with your grievance may not have much effect. So Jesus gives us a second approach.

1. **Take someone with you**

In v. 16, we read: “But if he will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you, so that 'every accusation may be upheld by the testimony of two or more witnesses,' as the scripture says.”

Sometimes when a person won’t acknowledge their fault, it helps to bring in a third party. This does two things: first, it brings to a situation, often charged with bad feeling, a degree of impartiality. An impartial observer can offer suggestions that those involved may have been unable to see because of the emotiveness of the situation. Secondly, the presence of other believers not only adds witnesses but also protects the sinner in any negotiations that take place, just in case the demands for correction are misguided or excessive. It preserves an openness in the process.

Sadly though, there are times when even bringing a few people into the situation proves ineffective. Sin entraps and imprisons.

Sometimes it’s necessary to bring in the big guns, not only for the welfare of the church, but in an effort to bring the sinner to repentance.

**3. Jesus third approach is to bring in the Church**

v.17 says: “And if he (that is, the offender) will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally, if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or a tax collector.”

In the story I told you earlier, this is what actually happened. The pastor and the woman he was having an affair with continued to justify their relationship and refused to give it up. (I really felt for the pastor’s wife in all this!) In the end the elders of the church said to the pastor, “You cannot continue in this relationship and remain a pastor of this church.” The pastor & the woman wouldn’t budge, and so they had to leave the church.

Something we need to remember is that if a situation escalates to this degree, a church should not look at this action as punishment for offender. Always, it should be done amidst much prayer that the person will see the error of their ways, repent and find reconciliation. Jesus always seeks to bring a sinner to repentance.

**I said at the beginning that this passage is addressing a particular type of conflict – that which arises when someone sins against us. However, I also said that in this passage, we find a principle which governs all conflict.**

**This morning, we may not presently be embroiled in a conflict where someone has sinned against us, where we need to seek reconciliation with that person. But we would not be human if we did not find ourselves experiencing conflict on a smaller scale on a regular basis.**

**Anyone here married? There are cross words from time to time in every long term relationship. Anyone have teenage grandchildren? What about difficult neighbours? What about people in the church who’ve hurt your feelings?**

**Conflict, sometimes minor, sometimes not so minor, is part of the landscape of life. So what’s the general principle in this passage?**

**That principle is simply – talk things through. Communicate. It doesn’t matter whether a conflict is a marital scrap or argument, or hurt feelings because someone in the church has trodden on our toes. The major key to resolving any conflict is for those involved to talk to each other about it.**

**Someone needs to make the first move. If you are in the midst of a conflict this morning – perhaps God is asking you to do that. Make a time to sit down with the other person, and talk it through.**

**The values of the kingdom of heaven are very different from the values of the world. As part of Christ’s church, His body, new relationships are made possible through our relationship with Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a well-known German theologian, said that "community means that we always relate to one another in and through Christ."**

That means that when two believers relate to one another, there are never just two people in that interaction. There are three - two plus Jesus. Without Jesus, we could become guilty of intimidating, manipulating, coercing, and misusing others. But as we relate to each other in and through Christ, each person remains free, and we are enabled to find healing & reconciliation in the worst of conflicts.

May we always be open to the presence of Christ in our relationships.

Let’s pray.