

Worship Service for United Protestant Church
Date: September 6, 2020

Welcome:

I want to welcome all of you to "A Word for Sunday" here at the United Protestant Church of Silver Bay, MN. My name is Pastor Ken Ribe, and I am the Presbyter for Pastoral Care for the Presbytery of Northern Waters. I bring you greetings from your brothers and sisters here in Northern Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Announcements:

Prayer of Invocation:

God of steadfast love, you have written your testimonies upon the hearts of your people; your commandments have guided them throughout the ages. We praise you for Jesus, who has made your will known to us. We sense your Spirit at work in our lives. Throughout all creation, you maintain your presence and give us cause for rejoicing. We acknowledge your marvelous deeds and we adore you. Make your presence known to us as we gather together—at a distance to worship you. AMEN

Scripture: Matthew 18: 15-20

15 "If another member of the church[a] sins against you,[b] go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.[c] 16 But 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. 17 If 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. 18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in 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."

Special Music (Pause 30 seconds)

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer:

Gracious and Loving God, we give you thanks for this day that you have made, and we rejoice and are glad in in. We are grateful for your love and your grace which you have bestowed upon us. We are grateful

that you have called us to be a community of faith united by our love for you and for each other. We are grateful for the support each member of this congregation receives from the other members, and for their love and support of Pastor Paul.

As we come into your presence today, we want to lift up those who are struggling with illness of one sort or another, help them to feel your presence and your healing touch upon their bodies. For those who are struggling with depression and other emotional issues during this strange time of keeping our distance from others—the isolation that so many feel and experience—may they also sense your presence with them giving them comfort and hope beyond this moment. For those who are grieving the loss of a loved one we also pray. Comfort them, and give them the encouragement they need one day at a time. Help them to not feel alone—even though they may well be isolated from others may phone calls, cards and emails remind them that they are not alone.

God, as we seek to find our way through this pandemic, we think of the almost 190,000 who have already perished here in our country, and the millions who have been affected by it and now are recovering or are recovered. Be with family members across our land who grieve today, and who hope for their loved one who may be very ill. Bring peace and comfort to all. Guide our leaders so that they will begin to respond more effectively to this deadly virus, and bring relief to businesses and workers who have had to at least temporarily close their doors, or be laid off from their jobs. Help us as a nation to unite together to support all those who are struggling right now to make ends meet.

Lord, you know the other concerns on our hearts and minds today, we lift them up before you now, and give you thanks for your watch care over us. These things we pray through the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray together, “Our Father, who art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. AMEN

Sermon: “Troublesome People”

Text: Matthew 18: 15-20

Rev. Ken Ribe

This probably isn't the case here in Silver Bay, but most churches are filled with “troublesome people.” They are filled with broken and imperfect people who say and do things that can be troubling to others in the church. Some people have no “filter” they just blurt out

what comes to mind and sometimes feelings get hurt, people get annoyed; some feel belittled and demeaned by what that person blurted out without giving it any thought.

There are other people who have strong personalities, and always seem to “Know what is right, the best way to do something” and they can bulldoze their way over people who are less assertive, or who like to look for consensus, which takes time—sometimes too much time—and they never get things done.

There are other people who are story tellers, some of whom can make you laugh or cry, while others go on and on and on about when we did such and such...and after a while, some people lose interest in the story, and get bored.

So with all kinds of people in a congregation, someone is sure to be offended, or hurt by something someone else says to them or about them.

The text is about “if another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault to him when the two of you are alone...” How do we do that, and how do we define sin without judging the other person, without letting our hurt feelings turn into anger, and “just unloading on them.”

A couple of weeks ago, the lectionary passage was about Peter’s confession when Jesus asked: “who do you say that I am?” and Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”. Jesus said to him: “Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah...And I tell you, that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” In other words the “church” will be built on that critical moment of faith. In today’s passage, the “church” is mentioned again, not to establish its foundation so much as to note the ways in which that foundation is so easily destabilized by conflict.

You will remember that the “church” was not born until the resurrection inaugurated its mission in the world. The “church” (that is the body of believers who were bound by faith in the crucified and resurrected Christ) was a future reality for Matthew’s Jesus. In a sense, he was speaking wisdom to a community not yet founded. In both of these references to the “church,” we may see most clearly the kinds of concerns that Matthew had when he sat down to write his account. These two narratives may describe the deepest concerns of Matthew’s community, concerns so important that Jesus himself addressed them directly.

But this isn't the only connection between these two texts. In both, Jesus reminds the faithful of the great power they would wield as a gift from God. (16:19 and 18:18). Perhaps the Spiderman mythology got it exactly right: "with great power comes great responsibility."

At the confluence of community and power, Jesus was instructing his disciples. Community is vital and is God's gift to us and it's the very setting in which God will move among us. And yet that community, as we know all too well, has to be preserved, protected from bitter rancor and pointless dissension.

The guidelines for communal discernment and confrontation tap into the community's own resources of witness. Unresolved conflict should not happen in a silent corner, behind closed doors where differences in power can overwhelm the weak. Neither should they happen through whispered rumors where the corrosive effect of gossip can easily pervade our lives, or demonizing those who have a different perspective? "Sin" in this context would be behavior that divides; belittles; judges unfairly; etc.

It seems to me that what Matthew is addressing here in the text is how can we be an authentic community in spite of the issues that otherwise divide us? I believe that this is where Matthew's guidance can help us have constructive conversations rather than those that make our blood boil.

All of us can be passionate about one or more issues—but do we belittle, demonize or judge those on the other side? That's where Matthew's guidance fits in. When we are called pejorative names; belittled or demonized, we need to step up and call it out in a way that facilitates conversation. Letting the person know that the language they are using, is not helpful to the building of the community spirit, and that "I felt put down by what you said. So, could you say it in a different way?"

We all have a story. Our life experiences have led us to different conclusions about many of these issues, and if we could listen without judging the others, maybe we could learn to see the issue in a different way. Gossip; slander; name calling; are not constructive ways to deal with issues. The Apostle Paul talks about these things in several of his letters to different churches—because they divide rather than bring together.

Here on the North Shore we are far removed from the racial unrest in the cities. We watched in horror as the peaceful protests after the murder of George Floyd, turned into violent riots with fires, looting and the

destruction of property. Some of us white folk said, “The killing of an unarmed black man is tragic, but this rioting and destruction of property needs to stop NOW.” But, someone else turned that around and helped me reframe it. “The rioting, fires, and destruction of property is tragic, but the killing of unarmed black people needs to stop NOW!”

For me, turning it around helped me see more clearly a black perspective that I needed to hear. The destruction of property can be replaced, and rebuilt--and no one condones that behavior but the dead person can't be replaced.

When we vilify people, we are not helping the conversation, we are escalating the division. So, I believe Matthew would say to us, “When another Christian vilifies/belittles, sins against you because of your point of view, talk with them one on one. And when you hear someone engaged in that kind of talk about another person, speak up, and let them know that gossip/belittling/vilifying/dehumanizing another person, is not acceptable behavior—if they don't listen to you, bring another person with you as a witness to the conversation so that it isn't just “your word against theirs.” If the behavior doesn't change after that, then you bring it to the church board, and have them deal with it.

There are people in some congregations who always look for things to criticize and pick at. It's destructive behavior and if it doesn't stop, then the wider body—or governing body needs to be involved. This is not easy work, and needs to be handled carefully. There are times, when a person's behavior is so disruptive to the community that they simply need to be asked to leave. Unfortunately, we don't handle this well in the church and in too many cases, congregations just put up with it, and other people leave.

So, is this a good blueprint for church conflict today? Do we need to confront one another with these prescribed steps or avoid them only to our detriment? Do we, in a culture with so many choices in churches, really dwell on the power we have to exclude some from our midst? After all, don't people leave one church for another all the time for any number of reasons to find another place to call their spiritual home?

Handling conflict in the church, and between members is not an easy thing. But we need to remember that we are accountable to each other and there are times when we just need to speak up face to face with as much firmness and grace as we can muster.

We also need to remember that what makes a church a church is precisely the presence of so many “troublesome people.” All of us are

sinful, broken. The expulsion of the troublemaker is a last resort, and Matthew's Jesus seems to assume that most conflicts will be confronted well with step one or step two, never requiring the harsh step of estrangement.

In short, the steps Jesus laid out here are not a mere blueprint so much as a statement of communal values and an acknowledgment of both the frailty as well as the utter necessity of communal discernment. Love requires that we address the inevitable conflicts that will arise among us. It is not enough to sweep them under the rug and so allow them to fester. Unaddressed conflicts can render a community unable to function as God hopes. But neither should rejection be our first instinct. Separation is not to be taken lightly even when it proves necessary.

David Lose wrote this: *"Authentic community is hard to come by. It's work. But it's worth it. Because when you find it, it's like discovering a little bit of heaven on earth: that is, it's like experiencing the reality of God's communal fellowship and existence in your midst. And, as Jesus promises, when you gather in this way—with honesty and integrity, even when it's hard—amazing things can happen because Jesus is with you, right there, in your very midst, forming and being formed by your communal sharing."*

Living in community is hard. At the same time we are accountable to each other and responsible for our actions and our words. We need to listen carefully to each other, and treat each other with grace and compassion. The hope is that we will deal with things face to face as they come up, listen to each other and always seek to better understand what has been said.

We are all broken people, we sometimes say stupid and hurtful things. We need to own that, confess it to each other and learn to forgive as God in Christ has forgiven us. Thanks be to God. AMEN

Benediction:

"Now to the one who, by the power already at work with in us, is able to do exceedingly abundantly more than anything we can possibly ask for, think of, or even imagine. To God be glory, in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever, AMEN"