

Proper 18A
September 6, 2020
S. Stephen's, Providence

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

If any of you have spent any amount of time with another person,
which I'm sure you have,

you'll know that inevitably conflict arises from time to time:

disagreements over a matter – sometimes small, sometimes large.

Conflict resolution is something which occupies a large part
of our society:

in a way, it's the whole reason for our judicial system.

Conflict arises,

and the two parties bring their complaint before the magistrate,

to be settled by the community or the state.

Mediators are called in to work with professionals

who have ceased being able to work cordially with one another.

Consultants are called in to diagnose what is broken.

Lawyers who specialize in mediation and divorce settlements.

Therapists who specialize in couples counseling or family counseling.

The list goes on and on.

The fact is that conflict is a part of life –
sometimes bad, sometimes good in its outcome.

The church is no stranger to conflict either.

A look through the history of any parish will reveal times of conflict,
and of course, the Reformations of the sixteenth century
were ripe with conflict, which spilled over into civil war and bloodshed.
Fortunately, church conflicts today rarely reach that level;
unless that is, the topic of Prayer Book revision or a new hymnal
come up at General Convention.

Today we encounter Jesus as mediator or conflict resolution specialist:

he tells the disciples,

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the
fault when the two of you are alone.

If they listen to you, you have kept your brother or sister.

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.”

Now I am going to guess

that when you think about the church,

and your fellow church goes – brothers and sisters in Christ,

the first thing you think of is not about taking them to court
in the event of a disagreement.

After all, this is the new community of God's people,
based upon the new covenant of love,
established by Christ, who gave us the commandment
to love one another.

Every week at Mass,
we are reminded that the entire summation of God's law
is love of God and love of neighbor.

So why then do we have Jesus in our Gospel reading today
talking about conflict and grievances and mediation?

Well,

as a Lutheran colleague of mine likes to quip,

"Christ promises us the kingdom but gives us the Church."

I'm not sure I quite agree with that sentiment,

for I quite like the Church,

and I see glimpses of the Kingdom of God all the time in it.

But I take his point,

and to be sure,

the Church may be of God, but it is not God –

it is made up of people like you and me – people who are flawed,
despite all our loveliest attributes.

Jesus knows this too,

and so he is very ready to provide practical advice to the disciples
when they ask him what they should do

if another member of the community sins against them.

You and I have all known disappointments –

we've all felt let down, and perhaps even betrayed at times –

sometimes by colleagues, sometimes by friends –

and even at times, those we love the most.

It happens at home, in the public sphere, and yes – even at Church.

But Jesus provides us with a model today not just of conflict resolution,
but of reconciliation.

The goal for the two members who have arrived at a grievance
is to be reconciled to one another.

If they can't arrive at that goal on their own,

they are to go to the community of fellow brothers and sisters

who will help them to be reconciled to one another.

If that person refuses to be reconciled,

then sadly, there is no more you can do other than to let them go,

and forget about it.

You aren't to hold a grudge, or harbor ill feelings –
simply let them be gone, let yourself move on from it.

But the first goal is always reconciliation –
achieved by honest, frank conversation,
and caring, listening hearts.

This is the way members of the Church are then to live with one another,
and this is the model community,
defined by love and reconciliation.

Such civility and dialogue and compassion
are largely lacking from our public and political discourse.

Shouts ring louder in the various echo chambers created on social media,
and insults and derogatory remarks are hurled without a thought.

But the Church is still here to remind the world
what we ought to be and can be:

the Church is called to model the highest virtues
and deepest values
rooted in love.

Reconciliation lies at the very heart of our faith –
for Christ's death and Resurrection are what reconciles us to God,

and the reconciliation begun in Christ on the Cross

has been rippling out across time and space ever since.

The mission of the Church is the restoration of right relations
between God and God's people – in other words, reconciliation.

It isn't always easy – it requires work and perseverance,
fortitude – noble character.

Just after the portion of the Gospel reading we heard this morning,

Peter goes on to ask Jesus,

“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?

As many as seven times?” to which Jesus replies,

“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”

It's difficult – and it's work!

It doesn't mean we should let people walk all over us,

but we are always called to work towards reconciliation and forgiveness:

Jesus will not let us off the hook on that matter.

As St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans,

we are to live honorably as in the day,

put on the armor of light, and live in Christ.

We are to love our neighbor – and Paul has this wonderful turn of phrase

where he says we are to owe no one anything except love.

I don't expect the tone of conversation in our national political life to change anytime soon.

I do hope that it will change one day though.

What I am certain of, however,

is that in the meantime you and I and the rest of the church

are called to be examples to the rest of our world:

to aspire always to the model that Christ has left us –

to show love for every one of our neighbors,

and to be agents of reconciliation in a world that knows

what it is to be torn apart and bruised and wounded.

It isn't always easy, but it is what we are called to do as Christians:

and we don't ever have to do it alone,

because Christ,

whose reconciling work makes all other reconciliation possible,

is with us every step of the way.

For as he promises to us this morning,

“where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

“Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

May it be so. Amen.