

“Where Two or Three are Gathered: Conflict!”¹

I

Someone once said, “where two or three are gathered together ... there’s conflict.

In his book *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis paints a picture of Hell that has haunted me. He says Hell is like a vast, gray city, a city inhabited only at its outer edges, with blocks and blocks of empty houses in the middle—empty because everyone who once lived in them has quarreled with the neighbors and moved, and quarreled with the new neighbors and moved again, leaving empty streets full of empty houses behind them. Lewis says that is how Hell got so large—empty at the center and inhabited only on the fringes—‘cause everyone in it chose distance instead of confronting and facing another as the solution to a fight.

Which brings me to today’s Gospel. Now I think this scene at first seems sort of rigid, judgmental. So what’s this doing in the *New Testament*. . . and how could it possibly have come from Jesus’ mouth? I mean, what is this puzzling scene about? Is it about judgment and pulling apart and setting aside? Or is it about mending the rips and tears that sometimes happen to the fabric of communal life? Is it about self-righteousness. . . or is it about sinners who are sometimes sinned against? Is it about confrontation ... or is it about compassion?

Well, let’s see. ‘Cause where two or three are gathered ... there is ...for sure gonna be conflict.

II

Now I have to tell you that when I saw the Gospel reading for this morning, this gave me great pause. I mean, this is one of those dangerous passages that can be ... and has been over the centuries ... misread, misunderstood, abused.

And of course, I’m a child of my culture. So at first I read the passage through a lens of my current life. And I have to tell you that the first image that came to mind was Isis—you know, that radicalized and truly evil outgrowth of *al Qaeda* ... such butchers that even the other terrorist groups have shunned them. So I think *they* would have no trouble gathering two or three witnesses, confronting another fellow

Islamist with what *they* consider heretical behavior. And if the one confronted didn't shape up—off with their heads!

OK—so violence and vengeance confronting what they consider bad behavior. A perversion of Muslim theology to be sure. But it's out there. And it haunts me.

On the other hand, we in the Western world seem to have moved beyond all that tough stuff; many of us have reached the point where we don't care what anyone does. I mean, we just don't care. Whatever. As we'd say in the 60s and 70s, "I do my thing; you do your thing. I'm okay and you're okay. Okay?" ... "It's a free country," we say; "folks can live any way they want to live."... So let's just ignore the impact of our actions on others.

But the problem with that philosophy—the problem is that you cannot live any way you want and maintain good working relationships, or stay married, or raise healthy kids, or keep your friends, or even call yourself a Christian. Or sustain a relationship with God.

Well as I said, when two or three are gathered ... conflict. In fact, in any human group, including the human group called church—in any group folks step on each other's toes. People say things that hurt other folks, do things that cause others pain. 'Course sometimes the wrong that you do, the pain that you cause, is unintentional. And yet, even though the wrong is not intended, it still hurts.

So how do we maintain our unity and love for each other after we've hurt each other? How to respond? There must be some way to respond—there must be *some* way between metaphorical beheading and not caring at all. So the question here is how to deal? Let's think about it a bit.

III

There's a great line from the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*. Someone shouts in anger, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." And Tevye, the lead, with a twinkle in his eye, responds: "That's very good. And that way, the whole world will be blind and toothless."

So let's think about all this. First off, there are some givens here, aren't there?

Because unless you're a hermit, living in a cave, you live in communities of some kind—family, work place, church like St. John's. And your and my rough edges do rub up against others—like tumbling pebbles in a jar.

And at some point—if you're lucky—you learn that you cannot have everything your own way. If you're lucky, you and the others in your group—your family, your church, your office—you learn to compromise—learning this give and take, as part of learning to be fully human ... in those communities where you find yourself.

But occasionally luck runs out. And you step on someone's toes ... or they bump up against you and it hurts. Sometimes it hurts quite a bit. So what are *your* strategies to deal?

Well, you can pretend that nothing has happened. Just forget it. No need to get upset. Ignore it and maybe they'll just go away. But then things get a little awkward between you.

Or maybe you're good at the cold shoulder. You know, the silent treatment. Poisonous! Oh, you never tell the other person what's wrong 'cause that would be impolite. So you just shun the offender. You simply X them out of your mind. And when you walk past them it's like no one is there.

In the meantime, it never occurs to you to ask them about what really happened between the two of you, 'cause you're sure you already know. *They* were in the wrong; let *them* figure it out.

Or the third strategy: revenge—I mean, the deadly kind—where you never admit any ill will toward someone but you let it leak out all over the place, never missing an opportunity to question the other person's character, or tell a little joke at his or her expense. Maybe a private smear campaign ... which in the end ... admittedly ... doesn't make you feel all that good about the whole thing. But hey! Whatever!

Well, I think any way you look at it, *that* community—your family, your workplace, your church—that community's probably damaged, diminished in the process. So maybe ignoring, shunning, vengeance in response to the conflict—shall we call it all sin?—maybe that doesn't work. And maybe on some level ... you know that. You know in your gut that community is never served when you “play nice,” or when you finesse or sugarcoat controversy. Maybe you know deep down that

community's *never* served when you build factions, spew gossip, let frustration fester. Or strike out in vengeance.

So let's go a little deeper into this Gospel passage. 'Cause I think there are two things you need to think about here: Confrontation and—what sounds like here—ex-communication.

First, what do we mean by confrontation? And that *is* at the heart of our Gospel passage, isn't it? Well I think confrontation means to bring two people —to bring us—face to face, front to front, to sort out what's going on between us.

And that's exactly what today's reading recommends. And frankly, I think it's also what you and I would do just about anything to avoid. I mean, who am I to judge? What is it to me? I go to her? *She's* the sinner; let her come to *me*! Tell him my feelings are hurt? What if he just hurts them again? And what's the use, anyhow? Things won't change. Whatever.

Well, as someone pointed out, these are fine excuses ... if you don't mind living on the outskirts of hell. But for those of us who are called to Christian community, they just will not do.

See, for you and me, I think there's something more important than being right or wrong. And that something is keeping the family together. And in a lot of ways, I guess it's a real nuisance to belong to a family of any kind. I mean, it would be so much easier if you and I were just a bunch of isolated selves, whose affairs remained essentially private between me and God. But according to Jesus, there's no such thing as privacy in the family of God.

Why? 'Cause I believe our life together is the main way God has chosen for being with us. Our life together is the place where we're comforted, where we're confronted, where we're shaped and tested, where we're redeemed by God through one another.

OK. Confrontation. That's what this is all about. But there's this second thing you and I need to think about in this passage. And that's the idea of ex-communication. I mean, doesn't Jesus say here that if reconciliation can't be worked out within the community, then you ought to treat the transgressor like a ... like a tax collector,

like a Gentile? That you should treat this person like a Cretan, beyond the pale? Isn't that what He's saying? Or is it?

Well, let's back up a little and widen our vision a bit. See, right before this morning's Gospel scene, you have the story of the lost sheep ... you know, the one where Jesus the Good Shepherd leaves the 99 sheep in order to go and look for the one lost lamb. So that's the story before today's scene. And then immediately after the verses we read this morning is Peter's question about forgiveness. "How many times, Lord, should I forgive my brother? Seven times?" "No Peter. Seventy-seven times." In other words, as many times as it takes to entice the sinner back into the fold.

So it seems our little scene here about confrontation, is embraced on both ends by stories of compassion and forgiveness. So maybe the whole point of community confrontation is not judgment, but restoration. Not retribution... but reconciliation.

Jesus says if they won't come around, treat 'em like a tax collector, like a Gentile. But again what's that mean?

Well, as far as we know, Jesus never treated tax-collectors or Gentiles with contempt. I mean, Matthew himself was a tax collector and a disciple of Jesus. So how *did* Jesus treat tax collectors and Gentiles? He called them. He touched them. He ate with them. And He loved them.

So here's the final point. Never, ever give up on anyone! That is what you and I are called to do. Never ... give up on anyone! Confront. Make up. Forgive. Seek forgiveness. Heal and be healed. Throw a block party right smack in that deserted center of Hell—and fill the place with such music, such laughter, such joy and affection, that all the isolated residents will come creeping in from their hellish outposts to see what all the fuss, see what all the light, see what all the joy is all about.

You are being called to stretch out your arms toward each other in love. May it be so for you ... and for me. And may it be so for us together.

Amen.

1. Resources used: *Pulpit Resource* for September 7 (William H. Willimon, Vol. 42, No. 3, Year A); *Lectionary Homiletics* for August/September, 2014 (Vol. XXV, No. 5); Barbara Brown Taylor's "Family Fights," found in *The Seeds of Heaven*; *Matthew* by Douglas Hare (Interpretation series).