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Proper 18 Year A

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Many of you know that, in addition to the work I do as Interim Rector here at All Saints, I also serve on the faculty of Bloy House, the seminary here in the Diocese of Los Angeles, which is located over in Claremont. My work there carries the auspicious title of “Professor of Church Leadership”. In that capacity I teach several classes, one of which is a basic course in understanding the unique dynamics of congregational life, and how, as a leader, those dynamics can be best addressed. During the first session, I always ask the students to brainstorm together a list of everything they hope to learn during the class, as I write down all of their responses. I’ve taught this course, in one form or another, in different Episcopal seminaries for 12 years now. And while the various items on that list have shifted over the years, there is one topic which is nearly always the first item on the board. Almost as soon as I ask which congregational dynamic question they particularly want to address, some student will immediately pipe up, “How are we supposed to deal with conflict?” And every other head in the room in unison starts bobbing up and down, like those little dolls you put on the dashboard of your car.

One would have to be either incredibly naïve, or at least incredibly unaware of one’s surroundings, to believe that conflict never happens in a church. Those of you who have been a part of All Saints for any length of time will know that we are certainly not immune to it in this congregation. The good news, apparently, is that we are neither the first – nor the last – congregation to experience this particular phenomenon. If today’s gospel lesson is any indication, learning how to manage conflict in the church is not something reserved for seminary classrooms. For, as long as there has been a church, there has been the necessity of dealing with conflict in open and constructive and God-filled ways.

You may wonder what kind of scenario might have prompted Jesus to utter the words he did in this morning's gospel lesson. Well... wonder no more. Today's reading begins at the 15th verse of the 18th chapter of Matthew's gospel, but if you were to turn back the clock just a few lines to the opening verse of that same chapter, you might unearth the source of the tension which led to Jesus' teaching about conflict resolution. Chapter 18, verse 1 reads like this: "At that time, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'" Aha! So there you have it. For not the first time, the disciples have been having their own little internal spat about which one of them was the best, or which was Jesus' favorite, or who got to sit at his left and right side at the dinner table. Some of you may be old enough to remember that great comedy variety show of the 1960's called *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. Hosted by two brothers, Tom and Dick Smothers, the standard banter between the two of them usually ended with Tom turning to Dick and saying, "Mom always liked you best." Jesus' disciples seemed to turn that around, and in some kind of contest of inflated egos or existential angst, argue among themselves, "Jesus always liked me best." And so it is Jesus who addresses this challenging situation among his band of followers.

Today's gospel, however, should always be accompanied by a disclaimer: *Caveat emptor* – "Buyer beware"... for lots of faith communities use this very text as a sort of "cookbook" approach to conflict management in the church. It may be couched in sweeter, churchier, more "politically correct" terms, but it usually goes something like this: If you've got a beef with somebody in the church, take it up directly with them. If you can't work it out, bring in a few witnesses. If you still can't reach a satisfactory resolution, bring it before the whole church. If there's still a problem... well, then somebody's gotta go... booted out of the church, kicked off the island, sent away to be treated like a Gentile and a tax collector.

For those people who like to live in a “black and white,” “rules oriented,” “no questions asked” kind of world, this seems to be a great model for conflict resolution. There’s only one problem with it... it doesn’t work. Why? Well, you have to ask yourself, “How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors?” He didn’t ban them from his presences, but rather was constantly seeking them out, welcoming them into the community, even going to their homes for dinner sometimes.

Herein lies one of the great challenges with reading the scriptures. The great stories of our faith can either be read prescriptively or descriptively. That is to say, we can read the Bible prescriptively as a sort of “rule book”... and if only we can find the right rule, we’ll be able to determine the proper course of action. If only we know our Bible well enough, God will answer all of life’s questions... which works fine until you get to some of Jesus’ words like: “Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor and then come follow me,” or “the one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life,” or “if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off.” Suddenly, the simplistic, “Jesus said it. I believe it. That settles it.” philosophy begins to quickly break down.

But that’s not the only way to read the Bible. That is to say, rather than reading it prescriptively – that it prescribes specific behaviors – to me it makes much more sense to read it descriptively – that it describes both the world as it is... and the world as it might be. Seen in this light, the scriptures begin to open up whole new possibilities for how God might be at work in and among and through each of us.

Seen in this way, today’s gospel suddenly takes on a whole new meaning. I think the key to understanding Jesus’ words this morning about handling disputes is found in the very last sentence of this morning’s reading. You see, the process which Jesus lays out isn’t simply about how to get along with your best friend, or your neighbor across the back fence, or your co-worker down the hall, or your spouse or family member. Jesus’

words are directed to a different audience. They are the formula for learning how to live together within the community faith. This is how believers are supposed to treat believers. This is a witness statement to the world of what it means to be a follower of Christ. “When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Quite a few years ago now, the U.S. Army had a great advertising slogan which inspired a whole generation of young adults to join the armed forces. Maybe you remember it. It was a simple phrase that carried a deep meaning. “Be all that you can be – in the Army” placed the emphasis on bringing out the best in every soldier – for themselves, and for their country. Apparently, however, the Army decided it needed to hire a new ad agency and come up with a new slogan. So, after years of success with “Be all that you can be”, the new catch-phrase for the Army became, “Be an Army of one” – stressing, I guess, the unique contributions every soldier has to make. But at least to me, those words seem to fly in the face of what it means to be an army, working and coordinating together to achieve a common mission.

I don’t know... maybe there is such a thing as an Army of one... but I know for sure that there’s no such thing as a Church of one. As Jesus says, “When two or three are gathered together, I am there among them”, I think he means it. We are, by our very nature a community. We are “one with”... we are “in union with” one another. That’s what the word means. And by virtue of our one-ness, we are in com-union with God as well. Some of you may know that, according to Episcopal Church polity, a priest cannot celebrate communion alone. There has to be at least one other person present. Why? Because by its very nature, communion must be celebrated in community. Without a community, there is no communion.

And so, Jesus’ words this morning are even more about maintaining community than they are about settling disputes. They are about reminding everybody within the

community of faith that we are responsible for and responsible to one another, by virtue of the fact that we all share in the one baptism of Jesus Christ. And that is no small responsibility which each one of us bears.

A number of years ago I was at a church conference where the speaker talked about “working your turf.” He described it this way:

“Imagine a circle with a ten-foot radius drawn around you. For most of us, that’s almost the distance from fingertip to fingertip – twice. You, as a member of the Body of Christ, are responsible for everybody who steps on your turf today. If they have a problem, it’s not just theirs alone to bear, but yours as well. If they have a need, it’s your job to respond to that need. If they are hurting, it’s your responsibility to minister to them. So go out right now... and work your turf.”

I’d like you to look around right now... to draw that ten-foot circle all the way around you – two full spans of your arms. And then take a good, hard look at the faces of the people who are sitting right this minute on your turf. Some of those people are hurting, or lonely, or questioning, or afraid. Some of those people you may not even know. God says to each one of us this morning, “Work your turf.”

The message of this morning’s gospel is that none of us in in this game we call “Life” on our own. It was that great man of a million sayings, Benjamin Franklin, who, at the height of the Revolutionary War, is reported to have said, "If we don't all hang together, they will surely hang us all separately." This morning, hang together, so that you may find your relationships with one another strengthened. And in doing so, may you find your relationship with God deepened as well. “For when two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Amen.