

Today we're beginning a four-week sermon series entitled, "Learning to Love Our Enemies." Though it seems more easily said than done, loving the unlovable is possible with God's help. I say it most every time I preach. Context in scripture is very important. In Chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives the disciples some practices that are essential for sustaining healthy Christian communities. Many of these practices have to do with honoring the "little ones" among us- those who have the least power within a community; therefore, Jesus reminds the disciples to act with great care and humility in dealing with the least powerful among them. It is no accident that right before today's story, the parable of the lost sheep occurs. This parable is about a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to go and search for one little sheep who has gone astray. If the shepherd finds the lost sheep, we're told, there will be much rejoicing over it more than the 99 sheep who never went astray because it isn't God's will that one of these little ones be lost. In today's scripture Jesus offers some advice on confronting another who sins against you. This idea of confronting "was based on interpretations in Leviticus that stated that 'one should not allow anger to simmer inside, but confront one's brother, friend or neighbor' (19:17-18)" (*Harper Collins Study Bible*, NRSV). Let us listen to God's word for us today but first, let us pray. **PRAY. READ Matthew 18:15-20 (NRSV).**

Conflict. Confrontation. Many of us do everything in our power to avoid these things such as: trying to shove it under the rug or gossiping about it or playing passive-aggressive games or taking sides or using our silence to intimidate or using the pulpit to shame people or abandoning our community of faith altogether. I was taught that if I didn't have anything nice to say, not to say anything at all. Some of the people who hurt or betray us, in our

minds and hearts, are dead to us, yet some may not even be aware that they have hurt us. It's human nature to avoid conflict and confrontation. The phrase, "We need to talk," makes our stomach do flips because we know it means that something is broken between us, and we need to sort it out but are we willing? Social media has become one of the primary ways some of us handle conflict, and it is rarely, if ever, a healthy model. "People talk more *about* one another than they talk *with* one another"

(workingpreacher.org, Audrey West). Just as writing someone a letter feels like a dying art so does having difficult face-to-face conversations feel close to extinction. Meanwhile conflicts continue to brew and fester and to further complicate matters, we're living in a time of major polarization, hostility, and conflict.

The church doesn't like conflict either because the church is made up of people. Conflict was present in the early church, just as it is today. It's still much easier to shun people than it is to listen and confront. What's wild is how much energy and work we put into avoiding confrontation yet, Jesus seems to expect and welcome it. "The question is not *whether* we'll wound each other with our words and actions, but *how* we should proceed when we do" (journeywithjesus.net, Debie Thomas). In this text Jesus offers us a radically different path in dealing with conflict: a path that encourages the church to have honest face-to-face dialogue and not to keep silent with behavior that harms others. A path where confrontation is a necessary companion on the road to reconciliation. Jesus "tells us plainly that the way we conduct relationships here and now has direct consequences for God's coming kingdom: '*Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*' (v. 18)" (Thomas).

Though this text is concerned with church discipline in a time of conflict, the end goal isn't punishment or blame. The end goal is reconciliation- a family reunion- not retribution. Reconciliation involves relationships being restored, particularly by both parties both of whom stand condemned and forgiven at the cross and are willing to work together in the restoration. There are two curious things about Jesus' advice here: 1) he puts the burden of confronting on the one who has been sinned against and 2) he doesn't seem as interested in who is right and wrong as he is in getting the family back together again (*The Seeds of Heaven*, Barbara Brown Taylor). How does the commandment to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves inform our handling of disagreement and division? Jesus wants us to try and regain a brother or a sister in Christ. I recently read an article in *The New Yorker* about a pastor who, while surveying a group of protestors, encountered a group of young people who, treating her as a representative of the church, told her, "It seems like you work harder to keep people out of the church than to let them in" (<https://www.newyorker.com/news/on-religion/how-black-lives-matter-is-changing-the-church>). Think about that comment for a moment. As Christians, we aren't in the business of calling people out and further exiling them but rather calling them in and inviting them to reconcile. Along those same lines, some have misinterpreted the verse about when all else has failed in confronting a person, treat them like a Gentile or a tax collector. Some have misinterpreted this to mean excommunication, exile or otherwise shunning the individual. Yes, Gentiles and tax collectors were seen as outsiders. However, in Matthew's Gospel we're shown over and over again how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors, of which Matthew was one, with love and forgiveness. Thus reiterating that the goal here is still to bring these relatives back into the fold.

Even when we use words such as “welcoming” and “inclusive” to describe our community, this doesn’t mean that we aren’t to hold other disciples accountable for their hurtful behavior because we are; however, we speak the truth in love and extend the invitation of reconciliation.

Just because you confront a brother or a sister in Christ, it doesn’t mean they’re your enemy; they could be your neighbor. But that begs the question: Is your enemy also your neighbor? Imagine if a fellow believer is your enemy and you’re hearing Jesus say you need to go to them and confront them. Now “we are getting at what is perhaps most scandalous about the gospel: that the enemy, the one who does not love you, the one who hates you- this one is to be valued equally with one’s family members. Instead of an exclusive love, which declares, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’ Jesus commands an inclusive love, which declares, ‘Love your enemies’ (*Mere Christianity*, Lee Camp). As followers of Christ, we’re called to practice “reconciliation rather than estrangement, love rather than hatred, forgiveness rather than prejudice, inclusivity rather than exclusivity” (Camp). Some years ago I used to be in a preaching group of six young preachers from various backgrounds and denominations, and we gathered once a year to retreat together and hopefully grow in our preaching and discipleship. I was the oldest in the group, and the next oldest was five years my junior. We would each bring two sermons a piece to preach before the group, and then we would receive constructive feedback. My next-to-me-in-age colleague approached me after a discussion on one of my sermons and said, “You know, Jennifer, when you talked about the lion laying down with the lamb and then you told the story of the white man and the elderly black man, even though you thought you were making the black man out to

be the lamb in the story, I heard that he was the lion.” What my words had left unsaid was what hurt him in setting up this failed comparison. It came down to this. In my trying to present one way, I didn’t see how what I was saying was hurtful and racist to someone else. My colleague, a black man, had enough courage to confront me and tell me how my words- that I intended for good- had hurt him. I wish I could tell you that I was the model Christian and listened to him without becoming defensive, but I didn’t at first. It was hard for me to hear and digest his words. I really wrestled with what he said to me and wrestled with myself and through much prayer and some time, I came to a different place and heard my friend- eventually telling him so. Looking back, I realize that he spoke his truth to me in love, and I continue to have anti-racist work to do. Yet, I know of people who have left churches or their faith because they were hurt and didn’t say anything or they were confronted and shunned without an invitation to reconcile. Jesus calls us to a different way. It’s not guaranteed that the person being confronted won’t completely walk away. Though we don’t control another person’s behavior nor the outcome, as Christ’s disciples, we’re responsible for how we treat one another. In a lot of ways, it is a real nuisance to belong to a family. Listening is hard. This work of confronting and reconciling undergirded in love is challenging. Jesus isn’t talking about some kumbaya, let’s just sit around, sing songs, and hold hands. Yet, “our being together is the chief means God has chosen for being with us. Our life together in a community of faith is the place where we are comforted, confronted, tested, and redeemed by God through one another” (Taylor).

Jesus knows that the disciples need each other. “They need each other because two heads are better than one; they need each other because they

can accomplish more together than they can apart; they need each other like brothers and sisters need each other, to remind themselves that they belong to one family” (*The Seeds of Heaven*, Barbara Brown Taylor). In the wake of the unexpected death of Anderson native and actor, Chadwick Boseman, I was reminded of a line from the movie, *The Black Panther*, where Boseman’s character, T’Challa, king of Wakanda, says, “But in times of crisis the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another, as if we were one single tribe.”

As the body of Christ, we’re one single tribe and Christ calls us to build bridges way more than barriers. In baptism, we’re adopted into a new family and into a new way of existing in the world. If we’re going to live in relationship with the One to whom we’ve been reconciled to God, it demands that we be a reconciling community. Christ’s promise to us, especially in our times of conflict and confrontation, is that he is with us. “No matter how much Jesus’ words have been twisted, no matter how badly this text has been used against us or that we have used it against other people, that cannot nullify the promise. There is a promise that God desires to be reconciled to us and we to each other, and that when we seek reconciliation, Christ is present” (Nadia Bolz Weber). Friends, the gospel invites us to forsake the ways of playing the world’s games, and to follow the good way of Christ” (Camp). For God’s ability to get things right is always more powerful than our ability to get things wrong. So...let us do this hard work and live our lives worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen.