

# Reconciliation

September 4, 2011

Year A, Proper 18  
Matthew 18:15-20

The central theme of today's readings is reconciliation. How appropriate it is, then, that we speak of reconciliation just one week before we observe the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Much as happened in the intervening years concerning reconciliation, both successful and unsuccessful, which may lead us to the conclusion that full reconciliation is not an easy thing to accomplish. The citizens of the Republic of South Africa made a deliberate attempt to engage in meaningful dialogue after the break with apartheid, yet even there one can see that more progress needs to be made. Difficult though it may be, it is nonetheless something we are called to do as followers of Christ.

Many of my comments today are taken from an article by Jin S. Kim in *Feasting on the Word*. As you might be able to tell from his name, he is Korean, and I was drawn to his thoughts because of his perceptions of Western and Eastern sensibilities.

The West is in many ways influenced by John Locke and the Enlightenment. Our nation, in fact, was founded by many people who were influenced by Locke. While he lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, his theories and philosophy are very much alive today and are characterized by a profound sense of individualism, with an emphasis on self-reliance, independence, and individual authority

In keeping with this, the church in the West has often been fashioned as a voluntary association of autonomous individuals. Lack of mobility in the past usually restricted people from going to churches outside their immediate area, but that is hardly the case today. People can change not only parishes, but also denominations quite readily. It is small wonder, then, that when we are faced with situations where we feel hurt by church members, we simply go to another church or cease going at all.

In the East, however, the church is seen as one body with different parts; you can't separate out the parts, or you lose the whole. One church member is not the same if another member is disassociated from the body. The church is a place of mutual interdependence. Members are bound together as part of the body of Christ, and the disunity between a few is the disunity of all.

This is the context of today's Gospel reading.

Jesus is anticipating that the church will have conflicts just as other societal groups do; we are not exempt from disagreements. We are not called to sweep

things under the rug and pretend there is no conflict. Instead, we're called to the higher task of reconciliation

Three levels of reconciliation are cited in the Gospel reading. First the aggrieved person is to go to the person who hurt him or her and point out the fault. Can you imagine how much wasted worrying and tension could be avoided if we take this simple step in our everyday lives? There's no need for accusations or threats, just a simple statement of how the person's actions affected you. Often the person was not even aware of the adverse reaction resulting from the offending remark or deed. The second level that is called for if the one-on-one meeting is not successful is for the aggrieved person to bring along one or two others so that the conversation can be confirmed. In other words, an effort is made to make sure that each side understands the other. Note that there's an emphasis on the responsibility of community members rather than church leaders, no specify penalties are called for, and focus is always on the goal of reconciliation. The third level is that of the whole congregation bringing the grievance to the offender. If that doesn't work, then the person is to be treated as a Gentile or tax collector, presumably as an outsider, but we'll discuss that more later.

Another interesting comparison between the West and the East is that the West values technical and juridical honesty. For it, the "truth" is the most important thing. For people from the East, however, the most important thing is preserving the other's honor. We sometimes scoff at this notion, but it is a very important part of eastern culture. Successful solutions to problems invariably have to take this into account or there may be repercussions later.

Through today's reading, we are called to a place in the middle of these two extremes. We honor the other person by speaking the truth in love, pouring out ourselves into the process for the sake of our relationship and the community as a whole. It is the wronged who takes the initiative. The desired results of "listening" and "regaining" at this one-on-one stage is acknowledgement of the fault, repentance, and forgiveness.

Only after we exhaust that, we are called to bring in other church members, who are available as a resource of discernment and guidance. We are not seeking to control or manipulate the offender due to our sense of victimization. Beginning a grievance with the phrase "You made me feel..." is accusatory and rarely helpful. It is far better to say, "When you did XYZ, I felt..." which reflects a simple statement of your reaction instead of ascribing a malevolent intent to an objectionable offense. We have a choice of how we react when people push our buttons, either knowingly or not.

After the offender refuses to repent and be accountable to the authority and discernment of the whole community, then is he or she treated as a Gentile or tax collector. The implication is that they should be treated as outsiders and shunned.

But wait. Weren't these the same types of people that Jesus associated with? Aren't they still viewed as people worthy of Jesus' attention? I think it's difficult to assume that Jesus actually said these words compared to his actions of associating with outcasts in the rest of the Gospels. The Gentiles and tax collectors are for Jesus objects of mission, not scorn, and that's how we church members, the Body of Christ, are called to treat them. The phrase in today's reading reflects a Jewish Christian setting, which is predominant in the Gospel of Matthew, and should not be taken on face value.

Jesus never gives up on these people from the outside. In the next two verses after today's reading, Peter asks how many times he needs to forgive someone who sins against him, and Jesus answers "seventy times seven" which means "as long as it takes".

When we join a church community through baptism, we bind ourselves to one another with Jesus as the head. We join together with people different from us, in gender, nationality, language, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Overcoming differences is what sets us apart from those not part of a church community.

In the church, we are not free *from* each other but free *in* each other.

The church is not a denomination or an institution, but a place where two or three are gathered together in mutual interdependence under Christ. We need to rid ourselves of the rigid individualism that can stand in the way of true reconciliation, the type of individualism that results in loneliness, alienation, anxiety, and distrust. Instead, we need to move toward a profound trust and commitment to other people.

In our contemporary society, hurts are often dealt with by people leaving the situation behind. But in these cases, death has dominion. A congregation can carry scars for a long time. God's grace is not allowed to work. As church members we are witnesses to the world of Christ's ministry of reconciliation. If the church isn't going to forgive, then who will? No matter how small the church—even two or three people—if they agree in their love of Christ and seek prayerfully to do the will of God, then God will respond.