



“Called Out, Called In”
Scripture – Matthew 18:15-20
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, September 6, 2020

“There’s a lot of pain, a lot of fear, and a lot of trauma. Both sides are scared of both sides because no one communicates to each other,” said James Hall, who heads the Urban League in Kenosha, Wisconsin.¹ His comment came after a week of turmoil in Kenosha — a city where the police shooting of Jacob Blake and the murder of two protestors have ripped the scabs off the old wounds of racism and economic disparity. Hall, of course, is speaking of a particularly painful moment in his community. But his words resonate across our nation. Because the United States is a country divided on issues great and small. Whether you’re talking about Black Lives Matter versus Blue Lives Matter or taking a stand pro- or anti-mask, both sides are scared of both sides.

As a nation we have forgotten how to talk to one another. We have forgotten how to listen to one another. I’m reminded of the sad state of our public discourse every time I open Facebook or make the mistake of reading the comments responding to an article. The fabric of our common life has unraveled to the point where our first impulse is to sever ties rather than to mend tears. We are quick to call people out and to cut people off. And while these reactions are sometimes justified, they almost always close the door to honest communication, to genuine reconciliation, to mutual transformation.

In an interview on the Gospel Beautiful Podcast, host Michael Chan talks with spoken word artist Joe Davis about this “Call Out” culture. “When we call [people] out, there’s not even a sense of accountability,” Davis says. “... Instead, I like to say call them *in* — call them into deeper relationship, into deeper community, into deeper trust.” That’s how we create a space for healing and justice (paraphrase).²

“I like to say call them *in*.”

Davis’ turn-of-phrase pretty much sums up what Jesus is asking of his disciples in today’s text from Matthew. In this discourse on community discipline — as Matthew 18 is rather dryly called — Jesus lays out a three-step process for addressing conflict: First, handle disputes face-to-face. If that doesn’t work, bring along a couple of friends to serve as witnesses. If that doesn’t work either, bring the matter before the whole community.

Only then — after three failed attempts at conflict resolution — should you treat that person as “a Gentile and tax collector.” In other words, only then should you consider cutting someone off.

¹ Corrinne Hess, “Growing Racial and Economic Divide in Kenosha, Wis., As City Faces Week of Violence” (*All Things Considered*, August 28, 2020), www.npr.org.

² Joe Davis, *Gospel Beautiful Podcast with Michael Chan*, Season 1, Episode 2 (October 20, 2019).

Jesus' instructions read a bit like a handbook. Even to Presbyterians — who are known for liking things done “decently and in order” — his protocols seem rather rigid. I think we all have enough experience with human relationships to know that no approach to conflict resolution works every time. Not even the one Jesus outlines. These three steps don't apply to every situation, nor *should* they. To instruct a woman who has been abused to confront her abuser in private is to abandon her to more abuse. To require a victim of racial injustice to meet one-on-one with, say, an avowed white supremacist exposes him to harm. Too often the burden for initiating process falls to the most vulnerable, despite Christ's command to stand in solidarity with the lowly earlier in this very chapter.

To focus solely on the steps Jesus lays out — as so many congregations have done — is to view conflict management too narrowly. If we use a wide-angle lens to take in the bigger picture, we see that Jesus' discourse is not really about a process. It is about a vision for Christian community. It is about tending to a matter that is near and dear to God's heart: the way we relate to one another as siblings in Christ.

When we use that wide-angle lens, we see that the process laid out in this text is nestled between two more familiar passages from Scripture: the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Commandment about Forgiveness. Jesus has just asked his disciples: “What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?” (Matt 18:12). And, right after the verses we read today, we hear that memorable question from Peter: ““Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?”” (Matt 18:21, CEB) When we use that wide-angle lens, we understand that we must apply this approach to resolving conflict in light of the straightforward teaching that God does not want to lose *even one sheep* from the flock and Christ's command to forgive another not *seven* times, but *seventy-seven* times.

The process Jesus sets before us is *not* about going through the motions in a half-hearted attempt to repair what is broken. It is *not* about shrugging our shoulders as we part ways, satisfied that we *tried*. It is about holding on to one another, even when relationships are strained, even when communal living is hard.

This is Jesus' vision for Christian community — that we live as sisters and brothers who value restoration over estrangement and forgiveness over condemnation. Christ's intention does not deny the challenge of doing life together. Quite the opposite. By pausing to instruct his church on engaging conflict, Jesus reminds us that disagreements are inevitable. Yes, we will hurt one another, and some wounds will cut deep into our souls. But love requires that we hold each other accountable for harm done ... not by calling each other out in an attempt to blame or shame, but by calling each other *in*. Love requires that we call each other “into deeper relationship, into deeper community, into deeper trust” so that we create space for healing and justice.

True, reconciliation is *not* always possible. Even Jesus acknowledges that relationships are sometimes beyond repair, that the decision to cut ties is sometimes the one that leads to wholeness.

But, even when efforts to resolve conflict end in estrangement, the process is holy. Jesus promises that much. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,” he says. These are some of the most frequently quoted words in all of Scripture. They usually serve as a reminder that Christ is present in our worship, in our work, in our fellowship. And while this is true, the assurance is more encompassing than that. For this promise is not reserved for times when life together is easy. Rather, this promise sustains us when relationships are strained, when communal living is hard. Even in these moments — perhaps, *especially* in these moments — Christ is there to bind us together, to transform our attempts at reconciliation into holy work.

Just as Jesus predicted, his church has had its share of discord throughout history. Sometimes the family of faith handles conflict faithfully — calling one another into deeper relationship as members of the body settle disputes. Other times, not so much.

If you've followed Presbyterian politics in recent decades, you know that our denomination — like our country — has wrestled with questions of marriage equality and the full inclusion of LGBTQ siblings. And, like all controversial subjects, this one left its mark on our common life with individuals and congregations staking out positions on either side of the issue. Too often, debate turned divisive; sometimes relationships were broken beyond repair.

As disagreement over these issues led to division, and division led to schism, the leadership of National Capital Presbytery asked the question: What would it look like to focus *not* on gracious separation, but on gracious inclusion? Intrigued by the question, members of that presbytery began seeking ways to reach across the aisle, to nurture relationships with siblings in Christ with whom they disagree.

The Presbytery decided on a forum called “Can We Talk?” Once a month they set apart time for what they described as “uncommonly gracious conversations among colleagues who may differ on matters of conscience.” These conversations brought participants together across traditional divides: urban and rural, progressive and evangelical, large and small congregations. During their time together, these gatherings used an uncommon approach to engaging diverse topics: They began by acknowledging the weaknesses of their own point of view and by naming the virtues they found in another's perspective.

For those who participated regularly in these “Can We Talk?” conversations, the forum became sacred space and the process became holy work.

Two of the program's facilitators reflected on their experiences: “It's the only example we can think of where those who disagree come together regularly where the goal is not to change the other side. We're not trying to win a debate. We're just trying to understand each other. We're not asking the other to change. Though, in the process, we might change ourselves. And what the two of us have learned is that we have a lot more in common than we originally thought.”³

It isn't the three-step process Jesus laid out for holding one another accountable. But these “Can We Talk?” conversations offered a framework for acknowledging division within the church, for speaking honestly about conflict, for naming the tendency — even among people of faith — to call one another out. And, over time, this process bore fruit of healing and transformation as members of the body made a conscious effort to call one another *in* — into deeper relationship, into deeper community, into deeper trust. No, these conversations were not always easy. But where two or three are gathered, Christ is there, turning heart-led attempts at reconciliation into holy work.

When engaged faithfully, such conversations can nudge us closer to embodying Christ's vision for the church — that we live as siblings who value restoration over estrangement and forgiveness over condemnation. This is the vision for Christian community that Jesus sets before us in Matthew 18. But I don't think it's a vision restricted to *Christian* community. Because God cares deeply about the ways we relate to one another — in red states and blue states, across divides of race or class, between competing dreams for developing thriving neighborhoods and cities.

Maybe this is the ministry to which Christ is calling us now — in this moment when we have forgotten how to talk and listen to one another. Maybe Christ is calling us out into the world, to call one another *in* — into deeper relationship, into deeper community, into deeper trust. No, in this time of division for our nation, these conversations will not be easy. But, perhaps we'll find that — where two or three are gathered in such holy work — Christ is there. Christ is there.

³ Jeff Krehbiel and Don Meeks, “Ignite Presentation,” Next Church National Gathering (2016), <https://nextchurch.net/2016-national-gathering-ignite-jeff-krehbiel-don-meeks/>

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Mighty God, you probe the depths of our being and you know us better than we know ourselves. Grant us the wisdom of mind and the clarity of vision to search our souls so that we may identify the corrupt spirits that take up residence within us. These dark internal voices incite us to act in ways that fray the fabric of our friendships. They goad us into becoming impatient, frustrated and surly, until we scorch someone with spiteful words, or we refuse to speak at all, preferring to gore them with the silent treatment.

God, help us to identify the malevolent spirits within us, and make us aware of how preoccupied with ourselves we can be. We focus so intently on the irritations in our lives, and we dwell so long on our personal problems that we fail to keep our concerns in perspective. They grow to irrational proportions, taking more of our time than reasonable and creating more anxiety than justified. God, you promise to forgive us. Thank you for every sign showing that you love us.

O Spirit of Wisdom, speak to us in our confusion. Life pulls us in many directions and presents us with myriad possibilities. We struggle to discern which path to take. There are also countless claims upon our time and endless demands for our attention. The sheer number of clamoring voices can drive us to distraction.

It is at times such as these, O Lord, that we yearn for your guidance.

Grab our attention and remind us that yours is the ultimate claim on our lives. Help us to distinguish your nudge, your whisper, your holy prod amidst the many temptations that seek to sway our thoughts and actions.

Tireless Creator, when we gaze beyond ourselves at the nations of the world, we see a planet racked by divisiveness and violence. We see a place very different than the kingdom of justice and peace that you envision, and it is easy to become cynical. Help us never to forget that love is the supreme power in the universe. Remind us that kindness is superior to animosity; that respect conquers contempt; that generosity towers above greed; that mercy surpasses revenge; and that hope defeats despair.

Gracious God, infuse our lives with faith, with hope and with love that we may follow in the footsteps of your beloved Son, who taught us to pray together, saying,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.