

CHRISTIAN UNITY IN A POLARIZED WORLD

Matthew 18:15-20

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I don't recall ever preaching on this passage before. It makes me slightly uncomfortable, to tell the truth. The first part of the passage with its advice about how to solve disputes within the church sounds dated in a way - I'll talk more about that later. It also seems very personal, almost as if we're eavesdropping on a meeting of people in the early church, hearing something that's not intended for us. I may have been reluctant to preach about this passage because it talks about disputes and conflicts in the church, which is something most of us would rather not think about. What if I preach about this passage and inadvertently start rumors? "Why is she preaching about conflict? There must be a conflict we don't know about...I wonder what it could be!"

This passage raises the question, "What kind of an organization is the church anyway?" Is it a voluntary association of people who come and go at will, who join one church for a while and then another...some who become very active in the core of the group and some who remain on the periphery? Or is the church more the way Paul described it, as a body, with each person integrally connected to the other and to the whole, each part, each person absolutely necessary?

Most churches I know anything about - American Protestant churches - are much more like the first description. We are here because this church is a good "fit" for us. We generally agree with its philosophy, we find that our association with this congregation enhances our lives in various ways. And sometimes that changes. Sometimes a church changes, sometimes an individual changes, and the fit is no longer right.

Losing members is one of the most painful experiences I have as a pastor. Sometimes people just gradually drift away, and sometimes people tell me that they feel they must leave, for one of any number of reasons. There was a time in my ministry when I tried to talk people out of leaving, and I still might, under certain circumstances. But most of the time, when people tell me

they're looking for another church, I wish them well and sincerely hope they find the church that is right for them. Likewise, we welcome people here on a regular basis who have come from other churches.

Things were different in the early church. For one thing, there was just one church. You were either in it or not. It was a brand new community, and the author of the gospel of Matthew was concerned about its health and its integrity. Members of this new church were discovering together what the character of their community life was meant to be, what their values were. How they treated one another would determine how they looked to the outside world, how they attracted other followers. And that, my friends, has not changed, has it?

Whether we are in the first century or the twenty-first century, people outside the church look at us, they observe our behavior, they watch what we do and they listen to what we say. They are curious, "Is there anything different about the church? Or does it completely mirror the outside world?" "Do people treat others differently within the church? Or is it full of gossip and backstabbing like other groups?"

Many people have been turned off to the whole idea of church because of what certain people have said or done in the name of Christianity. Some think the church is judgmental, negative, unwelcoming, unaccepting. Some think the church is intolerant of differences. Some people outside the church don't understand why some Christians find their faith to be incompatible with science.

What is dividing the church more than anything these days is the issue that has already divided our country to the point that we are polarized and almost paralyzed with inaction and fear. Politics has been splitting churches, and also splitting congregations and pastors from one another. You may have seen a recent example involving a UCC congregation in North Carolina. Their pastor, the Rev. Rob Lee, (a descendant of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee) resigned after speaking out publicly against white supremacy. His comments, and the media attention they generated, caused dissension within the congregation.

My minister colleagues have been very actively debating what happened to Rob Lee, and many of them have strong opinions about a pastor's role in these politically charged times in which we live. His case was the most publicized, but far from unusual.

We are also unusual here at Avon Lake UCC. It used to not be the case, but more and more, congregations in the United States are made up of people who think alike politically. In fact, it's almost a game you can play. Spend a few minutes on a church's website, look at the language used, notice the titles of sermons, and you can play the game called, "Is this church made up of majority Democrats or majority Republicans?" Most congregations have become mostly liberal or mostly conservative. I don't know the exact political views of everyone here, by any means, but I do know that we are more politically diverse than most. And I continue to believe that it is a strength of this congregation.

We are practicing civil discourse, learning to love people with whom we have differences, realizing that the things we have in common are more important than the ways we are different...and all of those lessons are sorely needed in our world today. After all, we don't agree politically with all of our family members, neighbors and co-workers.

It must be said that our political diversity does not mean that we have no standards in this church as to what we find acceptable. There is no question that we uphold a high standard. We call for and we try our best to practice treating all people with dignity and respect. We bear the name of Jesus who broke down barriers of race, gender, class and race, and so we must do the same. There is no place in the church for prejudice of any kind to go unchallenged. Here we confess our own racism and biases and strive to do better together, even if we disagree on the specific political solutions.

And we shine the light on what we have in common, our desire to become people who leave the world a better place, our commitment to peace and justice, our passion for helping the homeless and the hungry, the addicted and the lonely.

Personally, I don't think there's any better advertisement for the church than for people to see us out in the world making a difference. We could put a billboard or produce a fancy internet commercial, but what about showing ALUCC members working every Saturday morning at the Habitat for Humanity house in Elyria? Donating to the victims of Hurricane Harvey? Giving blood? Serving meals to the elderly and the homeless? Operating a thrift shop so that those looking for affordable clothing and household goods have a friendly and lovely place to go? When people outside the church see us at work, they see our values, and they will want to be a part of that kind of work. Mission is in our DNA. You'll hear more about that in the coming weeks as we launch our new worship series, "Mission Possible."

This passage reminds us that the church was created to be a unique kind of group, not a perfect group - that's hardly the point - but a group of individuals who are bound together, who realize that the behavior of each person affects the entire group. Christianity is not a solitary pursuit. As our friend Fred Craddock puts it, "even in the privacy of your own room, the primary prayer of Christians begins with these words - 'Our Father'" Not my Father, but OUR Father. We are bound together in Christian love and service.

What does it look like, in practical terms, to maintain the unity of the Church? It does NOT mean that we all have to agree. It does NOT mean that we ignore our differences or sweep them under the rug. It DOES mean that we care enough about each other to talk to each other, with care and sensitivity, when differences arise. Not for the purpose of trying to change someone's mind, although sometimes that happens. Not to tell someone that they've hurt your feelings in order to make them feel guilty.

In this passage we are given very good psychological advice. Whenever there is a conflict between two people, the first step is for those two people to talk it out, one on one. It is so tempting, isn't it, to bring in a third party right away? To complain to a friend about a mutual friend? Or to just lick your wounds and feel sorry for yourself? But if we care about maintaining our bonds of caring within this beautiful group of brothers and sisters, we will rise above those more petty and

immature instincts and talk it out, one on one. We will say to the other person, 'I care about you. I want to know what happened. I want to understand you better. Let's sit down face to face and talk about it.'"

Come to think of it, that advice is not exclusive to the church. It's great advice in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces. How many of our personal disputes could be resolved better if we tried to understand one another, person to person?

It has happened to me, many times, that the people I find it hardest to like, hardest to love, most difficult to work with, are the people I understand the least. When I was doing youth ministry in another church, one mother was a thorn in my side. She complained about decisions I made and how her son was being treated. To her credit, she complained directly to me, not to someone else. She didn't stir up trouble in the church, but still I convinced myself that I didn't like her. But one year she signed up for the women's retreat I was leading. There was a time in the afternoon when we divided up into groups of two for discussion and she and I ended up together. She told me about her childhood, about her abusive father, and I began to see her in a new light. From that moment on, I regarded her with empathy. I no longer rolled my eyes when she called. Our minor problems seemed just that. We were bound together. What can happen, when we take the time to get to know one another's stories, to understand how different opinions and attitudes were formed...it moves us beyond labels. We still might not agree, but we develop greater empathy for those with whom we differ.

In these volatile and frightening times, the world needs the church to be a beacon of hope and light. People are desperately searching for good news. The world out there will be attracted to our message but only if they see us at work on the things that matter, speaking out in a unified voice to proclaim God's inclusive love, and treating one another with care and respect.