

Sermon – Sept 6, 2020 – Restoration of Relationship  
Pastor Will Moser, guest preacher  
Redeemer, Ramsey

The Psalmist writes, “Oh, how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity.”

Peace and harmony: fine ideals to aspire to, especially among those of us who call ourselves followers of Christ. But not all gatherings, even those of any congregation, are always cordial. Occasionally there is strife, and dissention, leaving members at odds with one another, sometimes to the point of them not being able to worship together. I once served a parish here in NJ as Vice Pastor, where several members had taken out restraining orders on each other! Jesus is aware of this reality of the human condition as he addresses the disciples and the people this morning, as he advises us how to restore relationships and to re-establish peace and harmony. His words from Mathew 18 are a study in classic conflict resolution. In fact, in every ELCA congregation’s constitution we find Jesus’ advice as the prescribed way to resolve conflicts between members or staff. Jesus says, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.” One on one. Face to face. Alone. This is how to “regain” your brother or sister. In other words, this is how to restore a broken relationship, rebuilding an *agape* love community. But seldom do we follow Jesus’ advice. No, instead, we tell our story to whoever will listen to us, gathering the troops as to who supports us and who doesn’t. Or we confront the person with whom we have a beef in public, hoping to gain supporters to confirm that we’re right, or just. That’s the human condition; interested more in right and wrong than “I’m sorry.” and “I forgive you.”

He also admonishes us to, simply, “point out the fault.” Not to yell and argue. Not to cry and exaggerate. Again, classic conflict resolution advice: use “I” statements. “I believe that you did this to me.” “I feel distant from you, and I wish to clear the air so we can be friends again.” These methods are a first resort, not a last resort. They’re private, for now, but have ramifications for the whole congregation if left unsettled.

Jesus is surely aware that when two people can’t seem to resolve their disputes, then inviting one or two other trusted, rational people in as objective witnesses can be helpful. Again, the desired end is for the conflict to be resolved, so that peace and harmony may be restored in the faith community. In some instances, the divides are so pervasive, that in the end, after having the council brought in as a last resort, the offender may be asked to absent themselves from the community, for the sake of good order, and peacefulness. Unrepentant repeat offenders can destroy a congregation, and must be removed on rare occasion, but only, “when all else fails.” We remember that Martin Luther was excommunicated. The Vatican leaders convened, and asked him to recant his teachings and his writings. Even this was an attempt to reunite the faith community. Of course Luther did not, and, again, as a last resort, the church excommunicated him, categorizing him and his writings as being outside of the faith of the Roman Catholic branch of the Christian church.

I hope that you folks here at Redeemer are fortunate not to have major conflicts between members of your worshipping community. I hope that you coexist with each other. I hope that you listen to opposing ideas. I hope that you work through compromise and consensus in the decisions that need to be made. I hope that you follow St. Augustine's datum: "Love, then do whatever you want." When we begin with Love, we'll want to be good and kind, and positive. When Christians pass the peace, we're living out the Gospel imperative of peace and harmony with each other, and within our faith community.

May you find frequent opportunities to come together with your brothers and sisters of the faith, and may you remain close to the one who wishes to "regain" you - over and over, again and again, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.