

Proper 18 A
Matthew 18:15-20
September 10, 2023

“If Two of You Agree”
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[Jesus said:] “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. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my God in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

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Some of you have no doubt heard about the Christian stranded alone on a desert island for many months. Eventually, a passing ship saw his signal fire and stopped for him. As they’re leaving the island, the ship’s captain asked:

“What are those three huts on the island?”

“That’s my house and that’s my church,” replied the man, pointing.

“And what about the third hut?” asked the captain.

“Oh,” the man replied, “that’s where I *used* to go to church.”¹

¹ Chris Goswami. “Why do Christians clash? ... conflict in the church,” 7minutes.net, April 4, 2017:
<https://7minutes.net/blog/christians-clash-in-church-conflict/>.

It likely doesn't surprise you to hear that churches sometimes face conflict. Don't worry, this is not a gentle way of revealing some conflict facing us down here at New England Church. As far as I can tell, this is truly a healthy congregation. You're generally not afraid to be honest about your opinions, to engage in healthy dialogue, and to respect diverse perspectives. You are a rarity. In fact, this church is a treasure and, honestly, I wish you could teach other churches and the rest of our nation how it's done.

Disagreements will happen. Conflict will happen. And most experts agree that a little of it is actually healthy, from time to time. Occasionally, people will determine that their hut – their church – is no longer a good fit and they'll look for another hut that fits them better. This is all normal. What's not normal, though, is just how commonplace serious, sundering, destructive conflict with our neighbors has become. A quick look at the news, Facebook, Twitter, other social media, or the incendiary bumper stickers you see on I-80, and one can conclude with relative certainty that we are fast approaching a point in which meaningful discussion of topics on which people disagree will become all but impossible.

In large part, folks today seem generally incapable of open-minded listening and open-hearted discussion with individuals whose perspectives differ from their own. At the first hint of disagreement, ears seem to plug up, heels dig in, brains shut down, and mouths engage in full force. Have you observed this or is it all in my head? Oh, that our faith had some wisdom to share, some guidance for how we might move forward productively as individuals, as churches, and as a nation... But, it does!

In our reading this morning from Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that if a person feels wronged by another, they should go back to that other and explain their feelings. If it doesn't go well, if they aren't heard the first time, they should go back again, this time with impartial witnesses. If they still aren't being heard, they shouldn't give up, but they should go back again, this time with the whole community and try again.

There's no question that Jesus understood just how important relationships are. It's worth the effort to try and to try and to try to understand and to be understood. And then, he says that if just two people come to an agreement on something, literally anything is possible.

I know that this doesn't surprise you. You understand that if we all come to the table with open minds and open hearts, to listen and share and reason, we can accomplish anything. You do this at New England Church. But not all church people do and it doesn't seem to be the norm outside the church either.

I was talking with my mother this past week. My mother and I often have lengthy conversations and, as they sometimes do, the topics of politics and current events came up. I should say that my mother and I don't always see eye-to-eye on things social and political, but she is a person of deep Christian faith, strong moral character, and sincere intention. She is clear about her beliefs, but she is also an excellent listener and she enters conversations with an ability to learn, to change, and to grow – something I try really hard to bring into our conversations too.

At one point during a discussion she said, "I think we agree on much more than we disagree on. We may not always agree on how to get there, but deep down, we want the same things." In that moment, I was struck by the profound wisdom of her words. It's true, isn't it, that most of our disagreements aren't about the end results of things, but about the process – about how to get to those results?

Is it possible to learn to look at a person with whom we disagree and acknowledge that, at their core, they want the same things we do? They want the best for their loved ones; want to stay healthy; want to provide for themselves and their families; want to feel safe in their home and community and nation; want their needs to be acknowledged and cared about by elected officials; want opportunities to better themselves and their situation? Can we learn to see others this way and admit that we want the same things—at least *some* of the same things? That,

fundamentally, we have more in common than we were initially prepared to admit? Sure, we may not always agree on how to get there, but deep down, we want the same things, at least some of them. Jesus said that if just two people can agree on something, literally anything is possible.

I believe that as Christians, we are called to have opinions – to have beliefs. Our faith demands it, demands that we engage. But, we are called to have opinions that are deeply rooted in our faith and informed by the teachings of Jesus, who tells us that the beginning and end of all our decision-making should be love of God and love of neighbor. Staying out of the discussion, the disagreement, the conflict simply isn't an option for us. But, our faith equips us to bring opinions informed by love; sincere willingness to see and hear and understand others; and openness to the possibility that at our core, we actually agree on some things, want some of the same things. Common ground is a powerful starting point for a genuine dialogue, a productive disagreement, or even a transformational conflict.

As we enter a new program year today as a congregation, as campaigns kick off in earnest, as the school year begins, and as day-to-day interactions with neighbors and colleagues continue, we can be certain of disagreements – of conflicts along the way. We can also be prepared to engage so that they can be opportunities for growth, for understanding, and for transformation. And that really is how change happens. May it be so with us. Amen.