



# SAINT LUKE'S

## "FIGHTING FOR THE RELATIONSHIP"

THE 14TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
YEAR A

EZEKIEL 33:7-11  
PSALM 119  
ROMANS 13:8-14  
MATTHEW 18:15-20

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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Only Matthew's gospel uses the word we translate as church – *ekklesia*. Matthew's first reference to church, out of 5, is when Jesus names Peter the Rock on which his church will be built.<sup>1</sup> Today we hear the last 4 references to the church and they are all connected to conflict! Jesus assumes conflict within his own community. It is not an easy thing to follow the guidelines Jesus gives: If you have a grievance with someone talk to them privately, not *about* them. If that doesn't work, Jesus says, bring more witnesses to the offender. To start to involve others it needs to be a significant issue. We can all think of instances where a faith community has bullied or persecuted someone who simply has a different perspective or practice. Again, go to the person privately.<sup>2</sup> And if those private face to face meetings don't work, involve the faith community. The idea is – keep going back over the bridge, keep trying to gain the person, the relationship, back. And if none of that works, says Jesus, treat the person as a Gentile and a tax collector. That sounds like a cut-off, excommunication. However, we remember that Jesus seeks out lost sheep. Even Gentiles and tax collectors are not necessarily exiled forever. No-one is. Gentiles are those needing more instruction. We also learn in the very next verses how Jesus feels about forgiveness when we learn we should forgive  $70 \times 7^3$  (= 490). Even if one takes the textual variant of seventy-seven times, that is still a lot of forgiveness.

Many of us are so conflict-averse that we avoid it at all costs. What are our natural instincts when we are upset or hurt or angry with someone? We might ignore the person we are upset with (although we might hope they notice we are ignoring them). Or, we may pretend we are not upset

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 16:18

<sup>2</sup> Rabbinic sources indicate that if you shame someone publicly you can be excluded from the life to come

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18:21-22

when we are. (“It’s no big deal. I’ll just let it go.” It might be no big deal or it might be more significant). Sometimes we might start a private vendetta against a person, saying or posting nasty things whenever we can, without saying anything directly to the person concerned.

Whatever our natural conflict avoidance strategy might be, Jesus asks us to choose a different way. Christianity is not a religion that we practice all by ourselves. It is practiced in community and digital media is no substitute for face-to-face. That is the joy and the challenge. Jesus does not say: if you *like* this person you are upset with; if you feel you *want* to reach out, or meet with that person who has upset you or who is upset with you. Jesus simply says: these are the guidelines for my community. Try this. Do not give up on any relationship within the body of Christ. Always be willing to restore and reconcile as much as it lies within your power. Jesus seems less interested in who is right than in getting the relationship back.

Paul writes to the Romans today: *Owe no one anything, except to love one another.* That is a big exception. *Except* to love one another. We owe one another loving behavior. How we choose to handle conflict is one way we love one another.

Jesus places the responsibility in the hands of the person who is upset, the victim, to start the conversation. We are responsible to reach out if someone has upset us. We owe the other person that in love. The other person might be oblivious, and how can anyone restore something if

they don't know it needs attention? And if someone reaches out to us because we have upset them, Jesus asks us to be open and listening. Jesus advocates for positive confrontation – two words we don't usually think of as going together. Positive confrontation is for reconciliation, not retaliation. This is coming together with the goal of understanding, forgiving and moving forward. Speaking up when someone has hurt us can be scary. The stakes are high, but the rewards can be astounding. As Jesus puts it – *if your brother listens to you, you have regained that one.*

I had such a conversation with a family member this past summer. It wasn't planned, it just happened at the dinner table. As usual with family relationships, there are many years and layers. Nothing terrible but a lot of non-communication and missed opportunities. I was beginning to give up. My heart was in my mouth as I found myself saying things that I had kept silent about for decades. This difficult conversation propelled our relationship forward by leaps and bounds. Honesty with the goal of reconciliation and understanding can be transformative. It doesn't always turn out that way but when it does, there is no greater joy than restored and deepened relationship.

Our 26<sup>th</sup> Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori was recently interviewed by Time for a series called Firsts – the first women who reached new milestones. Bishop Jefferts Schori said: “Conflict is a sign of possibility, it's not just negative. We can't grow, we can't change, without conflict.” Jesus doesn't use the same words but he points to the same truth. Jesus points to the possibility of healing, of new beginnings,

deeper community. We are never quite as stuck in relationship impasses as we think. The Holy Spirit needs our invitation to enter in and change all of us. Conflict can be a catalyst for deeper relationship.

Finally, we are never alone when our hearts are in our mouth and we raise something profound for us with someone. Jesus promises in today's gospel that he is with us whenever two or three are gathered together in his name. Jesus is in the room when the two or three gathered in his name disagree and Jesus the great reconciler is here when we try to understand each other and move forward together.

AMEN





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