

Proper 18-A  
Sept. 10, 2017  
St. John's Cathedral

Back when I was a religion writer for a daily newspaper I covered a two-day conference that explored the reasons that people left their churches, most often permanently. Mostly it was because of some perceived offense, large or small. A person had had a disagreement or a disappointment that had never been worked out. Most often no one else even knew that this was going on. The information had never been shared – especially with the offending party. It was just easier to leave. And so they just dropped out – and maybe later asked to be removed from the mailing list. Even when people called them out of concern, the door had been shut. They were out of there.

As sad as that scenario is, every church has probably experienced this. It frustrates everyone, especially leaders, because it is so hard to address.

Of course in the church of St. Matthew's time there were no mailing lists from which to be removed. But because the early Christian Church was made up of human beings just like us, there were conflicts, offenses, disagreements that had to be dealt with.

So Matthew, in today's gospel, shares a teaching from Jesus, most likely framed in the circumstances of Matthew's own church, that addresses this dynamic. It is a matter of practicality and is a way to keep the community together. It is so practical, in fact, that it might sound a lot like the way an employee handbook of today might address conflict in the workplace.

It is a multi-step process that takes patience and persistence. First, if you feel offended, take the initiative to go to the person with whom you have an issue and talk about it. Work it out if you can.

If that doesn't work, try again only this time take a couple of others with you to have a fuller discussion that can be verified. And if that is not successful, the next step Matthew's sequence is to take the issue to the whole congregation.

There are some churches today that have adopted this sequence of event, more or less literally as part of their practice. We are not one of those churches. We would prefer to use the wisdom we find helpful, but not create a rule book. And that's one of the questions that arises from this reading. Is it about rules or relationships? Most often we prefer to admit that there is some ambiguity in most situations.

The process in Matthew has a last step if the issue remains unresolved. The offending party is to be treated as a gentile or tax collector. On first glance this implies that they would be expelled, since tax collectors and gentiles were socially out of bounds in first century culture. And this is the basis for some churches to practice shunning people – ending the relationship very severely.

But we would also have to wonder how to understand this if we looked at the way Jesus himself often related to tax collectors and gentiles. After all, Matthew was a tax collector -- a job that put him at the absolute bottom of the popularity ladder -- before being invited to follow Jesus as a disciple. And Jesus called Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector of Jericho, down from a tree and asked if he could stay at Zacchaeus' home. Just a few weeks ago we heard a gospel reading about a

spirited conversation between Jesus and a gentile woman that resulted in his praising her faith and healing her daughter. So there has to be at least a hint of mercy here that suggests that no one is permanently out of bounds in Jesus' sight.

At the very least, this gospel passage reminds us to take the initiative and try to work things out when we have an issue with someone, either in our church community or in some other area of our lives. Deal with it before it magnifies into a much more difficult problem. Work toward reconciliation.

There was a wonderful concert here in the cathedral a couple of weeks ago at which singer and songwriter Jeffrey Martin performed a piece called "Coal Fire." I've never lived near a coal mine, so I had never thought about what happens when a vein of coal ignites and slowly burns, moving along underground, then explodes into flame somewhere, burning a house or a barn in its path. He sang,

"I read a story about a coal fire:  
burned for eighty miles underground  
under rivers and across the state line,  
without a flame, without a sound.

Jeffrey Martin's story around this image is his own story, but I think a coal fire is a wonderful metaphor for how things can sort of burn underground in our own relationships and then suddenly burst into flame when they go untended. I know I've allowed that to happen at times. Today's gospel bids us to take some steps, perhaps even risks as we move toward reconciliation -- before something bursts into flame.

There's another aspect to this passage from Matthew and that is what to do about someone who might be dangerous or disruptive in the community. Those more severe steps in the process he outlines may well have addressed this issue.

It reminded me of a story from my seminary days that remains a very powerful memory. I served as a deacon in a lively parish just a few blocks from the campus while I was a student. On Maundy Thursday we were preparing for a parish meal, and then the foot-washing and Eucharist in the church.

Before any of that began, a man who was dating a woman in the parish came into the building in an angry, intoxicated state, looking for her. When he found her, he began to hit her. The organist (not normally someone who would get into a fistfight) tried to get between them and ended up taking a hard punch. Someone called the police who talked with everyone who was involved. It was agreed that the man had settled down and had apologized and would be able to stay.

This man had been attending our church for some time, so he was not a stranger to us. The violent behavior that night, though, was a side we had not seen before. He stayed for dinner and during the liturgy had his feet washed, washed the feet of someone else and received communion.

And then right after church he went on another rampage. The police were called again and he spent the night in jail.

You can imagine the anger and anxiety that were part of the aftermath of all of this—especially in the middle of Holy Week. Some demanded that the priest banish him from the parish forever, something he was unwilling to do. The vestry had some spirited conversation, there was at least one sermon addressing the issue and finally, there was a decision. He could return to the congregation, but not until he had satisfied whatever decision the court handed down (including any

restraining orders) and had also addressed his substance abuse issues. The priest was willing to walk with him through those steps.

I liked the way that worked out. His was a very public display of inappropriate and dangerous behavior that was addressed as openly as possible. The leadership of the parish was involved in reaching a resolution that held him to account, set some boundaries and made it possible for him to rejoin the community after a time. The priest continued to minister to him. I guess you could say it was a balance of justice and mercy. The goal, of course, was reconciliation.

Reconciliation takes a bit of a risk sometimes. A risk that is more than worth it. It invites truth and trust and humility and mercy – to say nothing of a love that sees everyone (even those who get under our skin) as children of God.