

*Two or Three, More or Less*

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**Text:** Matthew 18.15-20

‘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 Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’

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*May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.*

There is a painting by the Dutch master, Rembrandt van Rijn, which presents the writer of the Gospel of Matthew seated with pen in hand working on a manuscript. An angel is whispering into his ear. Painted in 1661, *The Evangelist Matthew Inspired by an Angel*, is a visual depiction of the traditional doctrine of verbal plenary inspiration – the notion that by the will of God, all the words of the Bible were directly dictated to the writers, and recorded with perfect accuracy. This wonderful painting shows Matthew stroking his beard, a look of thoughtful puzzlement on his face. You can imagine that in a moment he is going to turn to the angel with a question. He is about to say, “I beg your pardon?” or, “That can’t be right.” Or “Did you mean two, or

three?” Rembrandt has gently suggested the difficulty of the doctrine, and we can agree with him.

It can't be easy to be a Biblical literalist. In the simplest terms, one stumbles over details. Two or three gathered? Four thousand fed or five thousand? More challenging, though, are some of the ideas – in today's reading, if two agree, God will act. Even in an age less secular and scientific than ours, that would have been a hard one.

And perhaps even more difficult, the ambiguity embedded in these wonderful tales of Jesus and his words and his works. Take today's description of what to do when a member of the community has harmed you. This is sometimes called the conflict resolution policy for the early church. But we should note that it is not about honest disagreement, it is about harm.

At first the advice is straightforward. Begin by speaking directly to the person. If that does not resolve the issue, then go with two or three others. This is partly based on the Jewish tradition of having two witnesses, and partly on the simple good psychology of getting a reality check. Perhaps you aren't right in your sense of grievance, and the other sets of ears and eyes will help you recognize that. Eventually though, if there is still no satisfaction, you are advised to address the matter in the full community. Let the whole group intervene with the wrong-doer. And then, if they remain recalcitrant – treat them like a Gentile or a tax-collector!

But, wait a minute, here is the ambiguity. What does that mean, *let them be to you as a Gentile or a tax-collector*? Does that mean you cut them off entirely, cast them out, walk away? This interpretation has been very common over the centuries and many, many Christian communities have developed formal and informal methods of ejecting community members – excommunicating, or anathematizing, or shunning. [There is a story in my family history of a forebear whose membership in his Baptist congregation was terminated – a man from whom, as the minutes record, 'the hand of fellowship was withdrawn, because he was known to have attended a dance'!]

But, wait another minute, maybe Jesus means something entirely different here. For it would seem from other passages in the Gospel – stories we have read just recently – that the way to treat the ones who are still estranged after all these efforts is not to reject them or ignore them or cut them off, but to go after them. To offer openness and healing, welcome and encouragement. Thinking back to two other stories in the Gospel of Matthew – the story of the Canaanite woman in Tyre, whose child was healed, or to the tax-collector who became one of the disciples – we see that when Jesus says, let them be to you as a Gentile or a tax-collector, he is not necessarily recommending cut-off. So perhaps we find ourselves back at the Rembrandt painting, asking the angel to clarify the dictation.

On balance, it seems that the stay-connected message must be the bottom line. That does seem to be the way Jesus operates. And that is actually the harder message for us in a modern urban society. A society in which we choose our friends and entertainments, opt in and out of clubs and activities and commitments, we are more accustomed to walking away. It is quite a lot harder to grasp the nettle of conflict and live with the pain it produces.

It would be easier for us if the steps were more like this: If a member of the community makes you upset, start by ignoring them. Pretend it hasn't happened and avoid any discussion of the incident. Then, if nothing changes (and why would it?), speak to one or two other members, to ensure that they see the problem from your standpoint. Then see if you can isolate the wrong-doer, by excluding them from events and not asking for their participation. Just keep side-stepping, and hopefully if they feel alienated and estranged enough, maybe they'll just leave. Then you won't have the conflict any more.

And if they don't leave, you could.

In our conflict-avoiding efforts to make all things nice, especially at church, we probably do more of this than we'd like to admit. But Jesus says, no, stay engaged. Keep talking, keep trying. Treat them like a Gentile – that is, a person you don't understand and probably can't agree with. Treat them like a tax-collector – a person whose career choice you can't fathom, and you aren't sure you even respect very

much. But stay connected, find a way to stay engaged. Things may change. Such a hard teaching!

Jesus gives this advice not so that the church may be some little island of perfection in a messed up world, but because without it, the community will not be able to do its work. When Jesus says, do not step away from difficulty, instead step toward it, he is telling us to develop skills we need not for our own sakes, but for the work we are called to do. Living and working together as Christians is not an exact science, and so he demands that we learn as we go. He says that he himself will be the model and will be among us. His strength will be our strength. His engagement our engagement.

On a Labour Day weekend, we give thanks for the pleasures of the summer and the holiday feeling that is coming to an end, and turn our thoughts to the work ahead. When we gather as followers of Jesus, it is his work of love and justice-making that we are called to do. As we begin a new church year together, with new staff members, and new program ideas, and so much already on our plates, we are encouraged by his wise words about how to live together. And we are buoyed up by his promise that we do not work alone.

Thanks be to God.