

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18 A  
Ezekiel 33:7-11  
Romans 13:8-14  
Matthew 18:15-20

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Years ago I served alongside a pastor who had a big colorful poster on the wall of his office. It was a goofy photo of two chimpanzees hugging each other, and the caption said, “We Need Each Other.” That poster seemed silly to me, but of course it wasn’t. He kept those goofy chimpanzees in his office to remind him every day that in a faith community, *we need each other*. There might be times we don’t want each other, but the truth is, we need each other!

In that particular congregation, everybody needed that reminder. The year I was there, one family made a serious legal accusation against another family in the church. Rumors flew, tempers boiled, factions developed, and news crews even showed up outside a Council meeting. It really was a dangerous time, but the congregation survived, and the way that pastor conducted himself has stayed with me as a model ever since. The pastor was forthright and honest and refused to keep secrets or pass judgment. He stayed humble but strong and worked closely with Council to defend the congregation’s unity. He asked for help when he needed it – from the bishop, a counselor, from God in prayer. He took care of his own health, including springing for an Alaskan cruise with his wife, to preserve their sanity. The congregation got through that conflict because its leaders believed the community of Christ is something valuable, something worth protecting, even when it tests you to the limit.

Christian community is something we might take for granted, but it truly is a unique and precious gift from God. Just think of the amazing thing that happens right here in this congregation, on a day like today. God brings people together from all different backgrounds and communities and ages with just one thing in common—we belong to each other in the love of Jesus Christ. And God trusts us to form a community that reflects the character of Christ, as best we can, in qualities like forgiveness, compassion, respect, humility, generosity, justice, concern for the vulnerable. We are far from perfect. We make mistakes, we confess, we forgive each other, we start again in God’s grace. A church community can be a kind of holy training ground. What we learn here together, we put to use in other areas of life. The positive ripples go out from here. Which could be what Jesus meant about Christ-followers being “salt for the earth” (Mt. 5:13-14). Even a small congregation like ours helps season the whole city through relationships.

Today's scripture addresses the issue of conflict, which is a fact of life whenever people get together, in families, at work, in organizations. Conflict is not necessarily negative. Conflict can be creative. It can open the door to new understandings. Still, I doubt there are many of us who really enjoy conflict. Our discomfort shows in the roundabout ways we handle it.

Some people deal with conflict by making a scene – venting raw emotion without first weighing their words. It's expressive, but it's not constructive.

Other people deal with conflict by denying it – trying to go on as if nothing has happened, while all the time an untended sore is festering beneath the surface of normal routine.

Some of us deal with conflict by avoiding the other person, or even abruptly ending a troubled relationship, basically writing off a person or group without trying to heal the rift. It seems to me that this is happening more often these days; relationships seem especially fragile in our polarized society and in our digital culture. It takes extra effort to keep friendships and communities strong, and it's worth the effort for sure.

It doesn't help when people deal with conflict in what could be the most destructive way – talking behind another person's back, gossiping around, maybe on social media, letting off emotional steam at the expense of someone else. A former bishop used to say: "We don't confront the person we're having trouble with. Instead, we go and tell two or three of our friends, *Do you know what so and so did to me?* But Jesus didn't say, *Go tell everybody what that stupid jerk did to you.* Jesus said, *Go talk to the stupid jerk about what they did!*"

Essentially, that's it. We're advised to seek out the other person and speak directly, face to face. Talking in private will protect their reputation, and it makes room for honest conversation. We're to be as forthright and honest as possible, gentle but clear. Do your best to express your truth, even when it's uncomfortable. This is a way of respecting the other person as well as yourself. By your actions you are saying, "I value our relationship enough to try to work things out." And the whole interaction is meant to involve a deep kind of listening that will probably reveal ways that each person needs to apologize, and each one needs to forgive.

I find this to be such a practical and powerful teaching. I can't count the number of times I've put it into practice myself, inside and outside church, never perfectly, and often quite clumsily. But I've never been sorry I tried it. It takes courage to speak face to face instead of letting something fester. It also takes courage to rise to the occasion when someone else approaches you this way. We all recognize the sinking feeling that

comes when we realize we've hurt someone and we need to set things right. And, we've all experienced times when we thought the waters were calm and all was well, only to be called to face a problem with a coworker or marriage partner, a friend or relative. We ask God for the courage and maturity to make this kind of conversation become a holy habit. It can bring healing when we try to act in a spirit of honesty, respect, humility and love.

Today's scripture includes verses about what to do when private conversation doesn't help. Enlist the help of others who are respected. If necessary, bring a larger group together. We've all heard difficult stories about someone being judged or excluded or shunned from a religious group, but that is not the main emphasis here. The focus is on trying, trying, and trying again to bring about reconciliation. Only as a last resort, the Bible says, would you treat someone as "a Gentile and a tax collector" – and that means, stay in relationship and keep the door open, always hoping to reconcile – the way Jesus kept the door open to people like tax collectors that others had long ago given up on.

There's a lot of good news to take with us from this scripture.

I find it freeing to realize that "making nice" is not a Christian ideal. The Christian ideal is love, resilient love, in the spirit of the great commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Because every human being is precious to God.

It's beautiful how Jesus points us toward authentic community – which is messy and vulnerable, honest and caring, and always depends on God's forgiveness. Life isn't tidy. We don't have to be perfect. Jesus is with us in the mess, giving us what we need to repair damage and move ahead.

Jesus says, "Whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

We often think this means worship. Whenever two or three are gathered for prayer, Christ is there. But I think it means more than this. It means that whenever we attempt to better understand each other, to connect, to forgive, Christ is with us. When we summon the courage to address a hard thing, Christ counsels with us. And with every hard-won understanding our conflict may produce, we learn a little more about Christ's love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.