

CONCORD
SUNDAY SCHOOL

LESSON 36

SUNDAY,
SEPTEMBER 6,
2020



Matthew 18:15-20 NRSV

15 “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. 16 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. 17 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. 18 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. 19 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. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Background

In this chapter of Matthew, we hear Jesus speaking to the frustration of being in a community. Humans are messy and complicated creatures. The disciples are arguing about who the greatest in heaven would be and Jesus redirects that logic. This is the same chapter in which Jesus addresses the obstacles placed before the vulnerable ones, teaches forgiveness, and offers a parable about the “unforgiving servant.” The overarching theme of this chapter is about conflict. In your own devotional period, take a look at the levels of conflict and “drama” present here. *Why do you think that is?*

Today’s lesson will focus on addressing harms in the community.

Read the scripture out loud together.

Discuss with someone in your home. Why do people avoid difficult conversations?

What's happening during this passage?

Jesus is speaking to a group of people about what to do if someone “sins against you.” The first option you have is to talk to that person directly, and if that person understands, hooray! But if that person has a hard time understanding, then you meet with one or two others. This way, you have someone to confirm your conversation. If the member still refuses to hear the critique, then bring it to the church. If even the church is not a place that this person can be heard, then the advice is to let that one “be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” He then says that “if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.”

Why does Jesus use the word “church?”

At this point, the “church” does not exist in the way that we know it today. There isn't such a thing (yet) as a pastor. There is no such thing as a church anniversary. There is no Usher's sermon. The word “church” does not appear in the original Greek in the first few sentences; this is a translation shift. The more literal translation is, “if your brother shall trespass against you...”

Eventually, the word “church” is used, or “*ekklesia*.” This word does not refer to just brick and mortar churches, but instead, “a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly.”

Is there drama in “church” that is distinct from other kinds of drama?

The assumption here, made evident in the translation difference, is that the people we worship with will become like siblings to us. But Jesus was not specifically speaking about what happens in Church. Jesus was speaking about how we engage one another, our “neighbor.” The church is a place just like any other place. Drama follows us here as it follows us elsewhere. But it hurts and is more disappointing when conflict happens here because there is a sense that we should “know better.” How we handle conflict says a lot about us as followers of Christ. Do we tell the truth? Are we humble? Are we compassionate to people who are exploited? Do we say “sorry” when it is necessary?

Why does Jesus offer so many scenarios?

There are many levels to the conflict management Christ describes here.

1. Talk directly to the person who has harmed you.
2. If they do not hear you, get a third party to mediate.
3. If they do not hear you, go to the gathering of called-out citizens.
4. If they still do not hear you, consider that person as someone who does not want to be in this community and move on.

Sometimes people don't listen the first time. Sometimes they need a mediated conversation. Sometimes the community needs to hear and support the conflict resolution process because it is indicative of a larger issue. But there are instances when people who have done harm do not want to be changed by the process. In that circumstance, Jesus says, "let them be like an outsider to you."

What questions do you still have of this scripture? How will you commit to journeying with this text this week?

Connection to Today's World (photo from 2019)



This week, a collective of educators, organizers and healers wrote a public letter to Chancellor Richard Carranza. In light of COVID-19, the writers of this letter argued that the disproportionate trauma Black and Brown students would face merits a greater look at restorative healing practices. For example, at least ten percent of public school students in NYC are living in temporary housing, and at least 60% are experiencing poverty. To meet the crisis, they are

calling for increased funding for "social workers, adoption of mindfulness spaces and practices, and whole-scale changes to their discipline and safety systems." Instead of arrests, suspensions and expulsions, this community is asking for mental health supports, social services, and family and community engagement.

This is an example of a community asking for the resources and collective supports needed to restore communities to wholeness. We have no clue about the degree of emotional, physical, spiritual and communal trauma our children are experiencing. We have not seen them in person for months. We need to figure out what our plan is to address conflict and needs. And preferably, before sparks turn into forest fires.

Journal: What do you need in order to speak to people you have conflict with? What would help you have a calm and productive conversation?

Closing: Sing/watch “I Need You To Survive,”

For a video, click here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnaHTOUigJM>

I need you, you need me.

We're all a part of God's body.

Stand with me, agree with me.

We're all a part of God's body.

It is his will, that every need be supplied.

You are important to me, I need you to survive.

You are important to me, I need you to survive.

Prayer:

Dear God,

Living on this Earth is difficult. We are all trying to survive what feels like impossible conditions. We don't have enough money, enough food, enough space, enough love. Or so it seems.

God, remind us that you are a God of abundance. You will never offer your children a stone when we ask for Bread. You are living water. You meet us at the very point of our need.

Help us to manage conflict in more ethical ways. Pause us when we are about to snap. Embolden us to speak up when someone is taking advantage. Give our concerns a safe place to land when we do so.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen

Works Cited:

<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G1577&t=KJV>

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfdrOPgLiXi6ZCxucAyfqvOs059zVKrmU7cuenY3FSsIikp8w/viewform>