

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
September 10, 2023
Matthew 18:15-20, Romans 13:8-10

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God's Spirit.

Living God, help us so to hear your holy Word that we may truly understand; that, understanding, we may believe, and, believing, we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience, seeking your honor and glory in all that we do; through Christ our Lord. Amen

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.”

Romans 13:8-10

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal;

You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

About a week ago, a Presbyterian pastor outside of Chicago posted an article on his own blog. It was an article he wrote, entitled, “Departure: Why I Left the Church.”ⁱ It was a follow up to his final sermon. He indicated in the article that there was not enough time in his sermon to explain fully why he was both leaving the church he served and the ministry altogether. He had been a pastor for 10 years at his current church, and he was tired. He described himself as part of the “Great Pastor Resignation.” Like other helping professions, like education, social work, counseling, and nursing, many pastors resigned during and after the pandemic. He listed several reasons, among them was a sense of weariness, particularly after the divisiveness over the last six years, and navigating the pandemic. I don’t personally know this pastor, but I came across his article because another pastor I know posted it to her Facebook page. Her post generated a fair amount of comments. And then another pastor friend posted the article along with their thoughts, and again, this post on social media generated a fair number of comments. And then I saw another pastor post the article. And then a different pastor posted an article by a different pastor that was sort of a rebuttal to the original article, and that generated a lot of comments and discussion. Now, I will say that the majority of the conversation I read on my friend’s Facebook posts was robust, thoughtful, and empathetic. There was self-reflection and sharing of experiences that were both similar and different from the original post. But there were also comments that were dismissive and shame-based. There were some comments that didn’t always seem very pastoral from some pastors.

Last night I looked up the original post. As of last night, the article has been viewed on the original website over 344,000 times. It has almost 200 comments. I imagine some of these people found their way onto this pastor's page like I did, someone who actually knew him, or someone who knew someone who knew him, posted the article on their social media with a link to the original post. I did not agree with all of the original post's points, and I took issue with some of how he framed things, and I wondered if some of his expectations of ministry and congregational life (even with his many years of experienced) were naïve. While I have experienced some of the things he described, my experiences in ministry have been different. But I could still tell that, for him, it was time to move on to something different and that he was probably not going to be a very effective leader if he stayed in the role of pastor.

When I was reading the comments from the original post, there were many that were sincere and full of care, but there were many from people that did not know the original writer that lacked any empathy and were downright mean-spirited. Several people commented on the judgmental and snarky comments that they were the perfect example of why this pastor was leaving the church altogether. Frankly, when I read the comments on his original post and saw the nature of some of the conversation with its lack of empathy for someone clearly suffering and burnt out, it was disheartening but not entirely surprising.

Conflict in the church or about the church is nothing new. An interesting thing about our passage from Matthew is how ordinary it is. The book of Matthew is filled with some pretty amazing things. Things like healings and Jesus transforming before their eyes of the disciples into a dazzling bright figure standing next to some great heroes of the faith. There is even a story before our passage for the day where Jesus pulls a coin out of a fish's mouth in order to pay the Temple tax. But in our reading, it's

nothing quite so extraordinary. Right before the passage I read, the book of Matthew starts out this passage by indicating that would-be leaders of the community are to be humble and teachable like children. Then there is a brief discussion how one should pay attention to matters of personal morality in order that we not become a stumbling block for others in their journey of faith. Then there is a call to care for one another, the words are similar to what we heard in Romans, that we should owe no one anything other than that we love one another. It is then that we get to today's section which concerns conflict with others in the community.

I know there is a phrase that says something like "the only thing certain in life is death and taxes," but I think we could include conflict to that list. Most people don't like it and will do anything to avoid it. Some don't even like talking about it. And yet, given that the church is not the building but the people, conflict is impossible to avoid. In addition, given the nature of our world today, with the pace of change, and many outside factors impacting the life of the church, conflicts will arise. One commentator writes, "in every search process for a pastoral leader I've been aware of, the question will always come up, 'how do you handle conflict?' The candidate also has a request of the committee: 'How have you handled conflicts in the past?'"ⁱⁱ In my own experience, when searching for a call to a congregation, without fail the committee asked me about conflict and I, in turn, asked about experiences of conflict at the church. It is a part of church life. What becomes important is how we deal with the conflict when it arises. Particularly when the Vikings and Packers play one another!

Now, before I continue, I want to check in with you. How are you feeling? Are you holding tension anywhere? Check your shoulders, release them if you need to. Exhale. Maybe without even realizing it, as I have talked about conflict, even in a general sense, your body has

already started to react. Take a breath if needed, roll and release your shoulders.

The other thing I want to say is know that there isn't an underlying message in my words today. I'm not trying to send a message to anyone in particular about a specific issue or conflict. Today's reading is the assigned passage for today from the lectionary. It just so happened to coincide with an article that went a little viral in church circles about why a pastor was leaving the ministry. I love this church. I think we are a very healthy church that lives into the call of God in amazing ways. Just taking a walk through Rally Day is evidence of that. And I love being a pastor, and I love being a pastor of this church. No hidden message, I promise.

Even with mutual affection and healthy means of communication and ministry, we know conflict is inevitable. As I said earlier, because church is made up of people, conflict is a part of church life. What becomes important is how we deal with the conflict when it arises. Because if conflict is inevitable, I believe it is also neutral. I don't think conflict is either good or bad. Again, the process for how you deal with it when it comes up can be good or bad. How you handle conflict can make it better or worse.

Jesus describes a process in a loving manner declaring that when two or three are gathered in his name, even in the midst of conflict, even there Jesus is with them. The first step Jesus describes is that when you have disagreement or conflict with another person you go directly to that person and let them know. If you feel heard and understood, all is well. If, however, that does not resolve your conflict, Jesus says to take a couple of people with you, presumably that you both know and trust, and talk through the disagreement or conflict. If that resolves the disagreement, great. If it does not, then Jesus says that the problem

should be brought before the local body of believers. If the offender still doesn't listen, then, unfortunately, community trust has been broken and the person is to be considered an outsider. That doesn't mean the person is treated poorly, but it does mean that until acknowledgement of harm and amends is made that relationship cannot be restored.

I once had a very experienced pastor tell me that process is almost more important than outcome, particularly when dealing with disagreement or conflict. Process is more important than outcome. She said, while we may not come to a unanimous agreement on something, if people know that the process was fair, and that they were heard and understood, they will be more likely to support a decision, even if they disagree with it. I have experienced that to be true. I have been part of processes where I didn't agree with the outcome, but I know my opinion was understood, welcomed, and valued. Because of that, I was able to support the decision. To reinforce this, there have been times when I have been part of a process where I agreed with the outcome, but I was uneasy with the process because I knew not everyone was heard or understood. It made me question, ultimately, if the correct and best decision was made, even though I agreed with it.

And, as much as I believe process is important, it is also important to know what guides and supports the process, what the underlying assumptions, theology, values, and beliefs of the group are. Later this fall, in early November, we will hold an adult ed session on Oak Grove's values, decision-making, and commitments and I encourage you to come to that session. Again, knowing the underlying values, theology, and commitments of the church goes a long way in understanding and loving one another when there is potential disagreement.

Jesus frames the entire conflict process with the understanding that the church is part of one another, the Body of Christ. In Romans, Paul shapes his entire theology on love for the other person. Our measuring stick on how we are following God is how well we are caring for the other. This is not a view that is a rugged individual looking to see how much they can get for themselves. The church is not a collective of individuals, rather, it is a body of believers who need one another; who are better together. When you start from the foundation that you are part of a larger whole, and all the parts are necessary for the whole, it reorients how you approach conflict and resolution.

Just as a foundational understanding of theology is important, it's also important to understand what your non-negotiables as a community are. What are those things that are so a part of our understanding of what it means to be a church, to be a body of Christ, that there is not much room for compromise. While I know we are an inclusive church, and that is a core commitment for us, there are limits to our inclusion. Many churches like to say, "All are welcome here." And I know we, as the people of Oak Grove, would affirm that statement, "All are welcome here." But I saw this in one of the many comments I read this week, perhaps the phrase needs to be tweaked a bit to say, "All are welcome here, but not all behaviors." There are limits to our welcome. Some of our core commitments are around equity, equality, and justice. If someone were to espouse overt sexist, racist, or homophobic or transphobic beliefs or behaviors in this church, and they were unrepentant in those beliefs and behaviors it would not be acceptable. It would be a non-starter for us. All are welcome, but not all behaviors.

Finally, and in a similar way, understanding our values is important. You have heard me say before that most conflict is actually about a clash of our disagreement about values. Often the presenting disagreement or conflict points to an underlying disagreement on values.

Our congregational values are the underlying ethic by which we define our community. Our congregational values are a way to explicitly name the things we hold most important as we consider what it means to be a particular community of faith and how we behave and make decisions. Because of this, it is important to be explicit about these values. If you look on the back of the bulletin, or if you look at our website, you will see that we list our values. It is important to explicitly state not only our purpose, but what are our underlying values.

Conflict will and does happen. And we have an opportunity in the church to model faithful practices in how to navigate disagreement. We can demonstrate what it looks like to hold one another accountable, to seek the welfare of the other person, and act in compassionate, empathetic ways. Church is the place where we can practice how to love and listen to one another. Where we can learn how to speak clearly and work toward unity of mind and purpose. This is the way of Jesus. Amen.

ⁱ Alex Lang, <https://www.restorativefaith.org/post/departure-why-i-left-the-church?mibextid=Zxz2cZ&fbclid=IwAR3aB6VaT86mKih6Y8sDfRNsFquotG39fvI0FtQ2EWtPCc-fqo1udSFURmE>

ⁱⁱ Richard Ward, Working Preacher, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23/commentary-on-matthew-1815-20-6>