

September 26, 2021

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Mathew 18:15-20      “Our Congregational Way”

I have no complaints about my childhood. I grew up in a wonderful family, but there were times when we had disagreements. My sister and I had our share of spats. Who gets the front seat? Who gets to choose what we watch on TV? Whose turn is it to feed the dog?

I did not always approve of my parent’s decisions. I remember a time when I was in either third or fourth grade. My parents would not allow me to do something I really wanted to do. I was so mad. I can still picture arguing with my mom in the upstairs hallway. I was so upset I finally said, “I’m running away from home.”

I didn’t want it to come to that. I didn’t want to make such a devastating threat, but I felt that she left me no choice. I shouted, “I’m running away!” Without a trace of concern on her face, my mom said, “Ok, where will you go?” Where will I go? That was not the response I was expecting.

She was supposed to be visibly distraught by the prospect of losing me forever. She was supposed to give in to my demand. Upon realizing I had no idea where I would go, I broke down in tears. I lost that battle. However, I did learn a valuable lesson about not making threats unless you’re ready to follow through.

In any community, conflict is to be expected. Whether it’s a marriage, a family, a workplace environment, a church, a town, or a nation, disagreement is all but guaranteed. We can’t avoid conflict, because we don’t all see things the same. We hold different perspectives. We come from different places. We don’t all share the exact same values and priorities. Even if members of a community share the same goal, they can vehemently disagree about how to reach that goal.

In fact, I would argue that we can’t have meaningful relationship without conflict. In other words, we might avoid squabbles if our conversation never goes beyond the weather or the Red Sox chances of making the playoffs. But if we’re going to share our lives, work closely together, and say what we really think about the things that matter most to us, conflict is inevitable.

It’s just as apt to happen in the church as anywhere else. If it hasn’t happened already, at some point, I will say something from the pulpit that you won’t like. I won’t do it intentionally. It’s just the nature of what we do here.

The teachings of Jesus tend to be pretty challenging. There's a reason for the cliché: preaching is about comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.

At some point, I might make some offhand comment that rubs you the wrong way. I might insult you without intending it or ever realizing I did it. In any community, these things are almost inevitable. If people in community are to interact in meaningful ways, there will be strife.

As we heard in today's Gospel reading, Jesus addressed this reality head on. I want to look at that, but I also want to suggest that there are some things that are unique and special about Congregationalism when it comes to living together in community. On this day in which we have a congregational meeting, I want to take this opportunity to highlight a couple gifts of our congregation way.

The first is covenant relationship. When Jesus began his ministry, he and his 12 disciples formed a community. Before the Christian church even existed, there was conflict amongst the followers of Jesus. For example, they argued with one another about who was the greatest among them.

In our reading today, Jesus describes what to do when one member of the community wrongs another. First, you speak to the person individually. If that doesn't bring about reconciliation, you send a committee. If that doesn't work, the person who refuses to accept community reconciliation is to be treated "as a Gentile and a tax collector," that is, someone to be encouraged to repent and to be brought into the fold.

Notice Jesus encouraged multiple efforts to restore the relationship. It's an indication that we don't give up on our relationships easily. We commit to one another. Another word for it is covenant. This is a distinctive characteristic of Congregationalism. In the Congregational church, we are not bound together by a shared belief in the Apostles Creed, or by bishops, or by our thoughts on social issues.

When we become members in the Congregational church, we make vows to the local church that we will be faithful members. The church then makes a vow to each of us, that it will support us in our spiritual journey. It's not unlike a couple making marriage vows. When you strip away all of the formality and the rituals, a wedding comes down to two people making covenant promises to one another.

Every marriage has difficulties and disagreements, but there are promises: "I give myself to you in the covenant of marriage. I promise to love and sustain you in this covenant, from this day forward, in sickness and in

health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, as long as we both shall live." In the Congregational church, we are bound to one another by sacred promises, by covenant.

The second gift of the Congregational way I want to talk about is the Congregational meeting. After Jesus described the process of reconciliation among members of the community, he said this: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

How many times have you heard that around the church? We tend to quote Jesus when we want to affirm that a small gathering of church folk can be just as meaningful and as important as a larger gathering. We've all done it. You show up for Sunday worship in the middle of a blizzard and three or four people pull up chairs to worship together. Only three people show up for an evening meeting. Inevitably, someone says it: "Wherever two or three are gathered..."

But that saying has a much deeper significance. It was the conviction of the earliest Congregationalists that if Christ really meant that "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them," then it was in the gathered community that Christ could most directly and powerfully lead the church.

In other words, if Jesus is present when we gather for a church meeting, we need to be prepared to receive Christ's guidance. In his book The Congregational Way of Life, Arthur Rouner writes, "The important thing is the attitude of the people: the attitude of expectancy; the attitude of openness – of having eyes to see and ears to hear; and the attitude of accepting one another... of believing that the Spirit can speak that day through any one of them, and of being sincerely ready to hear what they have to say. It is also the attitude of coming to the meeting to do Christ's will and not your own."

Rouner is clear. There's something that makes a congregational meeting different than other meetings. He goes on to say this, and this, he says, is the hardest thing: "No [person] dare come to a Church Meeting convinced that he [or she] already has the answer to questions that will be raised, and with an iron-bound determination to vote through [their] idea come what may." That is to say if we believe that Christ is truly present with us, we at least need to be open to changing our minds based on what he reveals.

Have you ever been in a heated discussion in which someone said something that changed the whole dynamic? A colleague of mine once described a meeting of the worship committee in his church. They were discussing the passing of the peace.

In every church I've ever served, there has been disagreement about the passing of the peace. Some people like it; some don't. Some think it should be a solemn, reflective experience. Others want to make it as jovial and boisterous as possible.

This worship committee was debating whether to include the passing of the peace in the worship service or not. Members on both sides argued for their position. There was one woman who hadn't said anything. She was a long-time member of the church. She lived alone. As she sat in deep thought, she appeared to get a little emotional.

When there was a lull in the conversation, she finally spoke. She said, "I was just thinking that the passing of the peace is the only time during the week that I feel the touch of another human being." My colleague telling this story said, "The room went silent." They had a meeting. Everyone had a chance to speak and they were moved by a perspective that neither side had even considered.

You and I stand in a great tradition. I'm glad we follow a savior who promises to show up whenever we gather in his name. I'm glad we worship a God who makes covenant promises and invites us to be in covenant with one another. I'm glad my mom didn't get rattled, in the face of my anxiety. She knew our disagreement would be one of many to come and that our relationship would not only survive, but strengthen because of them.

I want to conclude with these words of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Let us pray:

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that, if I do this, You will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust You always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and You will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.*