

## “Of Gentiles and Tax Collectors”

Matthew 18:15-20

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### The 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

*Prayer: In the quietness of these moments, O God, startle us by your presence. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing your word, we may see and know Jesus the Christ and better understand his will for our lives. We ask this in his name. Amen.*

It is very good to be back after my summer vacation, a time spent enjoying the gift of relaxation and rest, and of being able to sometimes waste entire days and to enjoy Lake Michigan and its sunset while being together as a family. I am always grateful for that time away at our place in Saugatuck, Michigan—a place we have come to love so much that last summer to celebrate my fiftieth birthday, I bought us all cemetery plots there. So we have pretty much made a long term commitment to our little community where we spend the summer.

And after a nice, stress free relaxing vacation, I can't tell you how good it feels to return to a church and to a denomination completely free of all conflict and pressing issues. How nice it is to reenter a church and denomination where nothing at all is complicated and where everything we do and say together as Presbyterians bears witness to the fact that the Kingdom has apparently come in full, and where our life together is all sweet thoughts as we, the endlessly patient saints dwell under cloudless skies. And where every church neighbor loves our garden fence!

It's good to be back and in a curious way, I'm grateful that on my first Sunday back in the pulpit the Common Lectionary has handed this text about church members not getting along. It seems fitting if not altogether timely.

Not much interrupted my summer vacation but as many of you know, I have been involved in some conversations within our denomination in response to a recent vote on whom the Presbyterian Church is going to ordain. These conversations have included some other progressive leaders in the denomination and have essentially been between us and seven pastors of large, conservative congregations. And these conservative pastors are wondering how with integrity, they can remain in a denomination with churches like this one, for example, that have historically and openly ordain to office gay and lesbian people.

Whatever your feelings may be on that issue, I want to talk about it today *not* from the perspective of advocating one position over and against another. The church has decided that issue so that local congregations are now free to ordain those whom they feel led by the Spirit to nominate and elect. But I want to discuss it in terms of what's happening in our denominational life together.

Last week there was a gathering here in the Twin Cities of the “like minded” called by the seven pastors who had previously pronounced the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to be “deathly ill,” a notion I find offensive and frankly, not true. I attended the Gathering *not* because the seven organizing pastors consider me to be like minded, they don't, but because it was open to anyone and I've gotten to know these seven pastors and I was frankly, curious.

Some two thousand people from around the country showed up. And while The Gathering, as it was called, was less angry in tone than I had been expecting, there were nonetheless some very disturbing undertones present. The seven conservative pastors announced that they are forming a new denomination for those congregations that want to leave, and they offered other options for churches that cannot leave or that didn't necessarily want to leave but were not happy about staying put. They just don't want to be in fellowship with the "unlikeminded."

So that was last week, my first week back from vacation, and this Sunday we read this text from Matthew's Gospel about the church in conflict. And what I appreciate about this text is how realistic it is about the church and about our life together. In Mathew's church, people, no matter how committed and sincere we may be, are still people and stormy weather is always on the horizon.

We may sing, "Bless be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love..." but painful breaks can and do occur, causing us *not* to remain bound to one another but to be torn apart and fragmented. We may sing, "We are one in the Spirit we are one in the Lord..." but sharp, sometimes angry words can do real damage and shatter the notion that we are one. We may sing, "The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord..." but jockeying for power and control can shake even a strong foundation off its footing (*Matthew*, Thomas Long, p.209).

So I appreciate Matthew's realistic appraisal of the church and its dynamics. I appreciate the Gospel's reminder that Christianity itself is a group process. The New Testament isn't so much concerned with the cultivation of individual spiritual virtues as it is with the maintenance of the Christian community. The most virtuous soul when left alone is like a burning coal that will eventually grow colder rather than hotter. To be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ we need each other and that certainly includes people with whom we disagree.

And this strong emphasis on community and communal, connectional living, runs completely counter to the rampant individualism that has taken over huge segments of our society.

Now I would not want to leave you with the impression that what churches do best is fight. Or that the greatest amount of my time is spent soothing ruffled feathers and calming troubled waters. Nor do I want to give you the impression that when looking at a text about people in the church not getting along, that the seven conservative pastors represent any one faction in Jesus' teaching anymore than do the progressives. In our conversations together, we have all acknowledged our failure to be in conversation with one another across theological lines for far too long, perhaps contributing to and exacerbating our current problems.

But I cannot get around what seems to be a very basic premise here, namely that we are called to be the church and to be in fellowship and communion with one another. So what happens when the menu for the church potluck includes some unwelcome entrees such as mistrust, accusations and threats of leaving?

"If another member of the church sins against you..." Jesus begins, and then follows with a detailed process for addressing those conflicts when they inevitably emerge. And let me caution at this point that people choosing this model of conflict resolution will quickly discover how time consuming it is, how frustrating and sometimes seemingly hopeless it can feel.

Because in the process given to us by Jesus, no one is written off in the name of a quick solution. According to this process, no one walks out of a meeting or slams the door behind them demanding their own way. On the contrary, great amounts of time and energy are expended in an attempt to work things out as people who are one

in Christ should be able to work things out. In this text and according to Jesus, our relationships with one another are to be taken seriously and nurtured no matter what.

So go to that member of the church who has offended you and point out their fault to them. If they hear you and see the error of their ways, or point out and clarify your misunderstanding of the situation, then that's terrific and you can both move forward. If that does not work, take one or two others with you and try it again so that the offending party knows that there just might be some legitimacy to your complaint. If that fails to work, then tell it to the whole church. And finally, if that doesn't work, if you have exhausted all those sincere efforts to bring about a resolution to your conflict, Jesus offers a final resolution. "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

And please hear what Jesus is saying. When he said those words, they mean something quite different from the way they first sound. Upon first hearing you get the sense that Jesus is giving the offended party a free license to write off the offenders, or to treat them poorly. In that ancient culture Gentiles were not welcome or thought to be in God's favor, and tax collectors were despised as crooks and cheats, gouging people for more than they actually owed.

So when Jesus tells those who are having trouble dealing with someone who is problematic—when he tells them to treat them like a Gentile or a tax collector, there is a tremendous amount of irony in that. After all, coming from the one who welcomed Gentiles and extended God's favor and welcome even to them—and coming from the one who socialized with tax collectors—in their homes for heaven's sake, and who endured great criticism for associating with them—for breaking bread with their ilk, it is an ironic twist that when understood, in no way calls for dismissing, rejecting or walking away from anyone.

In fact it's just the opposite. It's a charge to go out of your way on their behalf. Walking away from those with whom we disagree or from whom we even have some profound differences, is simply not faithful to our Lord's vision of the community he sought to establish. And it's incredibly short sighted given our unique history as Reformed Christians, with enough off shoots and splinter denominations so as to be shameful—each an attempt to further purify the church. But it's also short sighted given our unique history as Americans.

This summer I waded through an important new book by sociologists Robert Putnam and David Campbell entitled *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. The authors carefully document the ways in which religion has indeed been a dividing force in America's development. But they also lift up the unprecedented levels of religious toleration and a rare ability that we Americans seem to possess to live peaceably with our neighbors, whatever they believe and however they worship, if at all.

And in reading this book I couldn't help but think about what's happening in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today and the many long conversations in which I've been engaged. So after all of their research and given where we are in our polarized national life—a time when we seem as divided as ever, here is what they conclude.

America has had sporadic religious riots, but no sustained religious wars. From its founding, America has had religious toleration encoded in its national DNA. The early years of the republic were informed by John Locke's conception of religious toleration, justifying it as a means of keeping the civil peace. From Locke, it is a small step to Thomas Jefferson's acceptance of different faiths so long as they do not infringe on his freedoms.

Over time, that minimal conception of toleration on practical grounds has evolved into an explicit embrace of religious diversity for its own sake. There were bumps along the way, as evidenced by outbreaks of anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, anti-Mormonism, and any number of other anti-isms. And even if the religious diversity of today is not completely inclusive, it is still far more expansive than anything imagined by the Founders. Religious pluralism is embraced by an extremely high percentage of Americans who say that such diversity is good for the country.

And then Puttnam and Campbell conclude this way.

As Americans have come to live by, make friends with, and wed people of other religions, their overlapping social relationships have made it difficult to sustain interreligious hostility. How has America solved the puzzle of religious pluralism—the coexistence of religious diversity and devotion? And how has it done so in the wake of growing religious polarization? By creating a web of interlocking personal relationships among people of many different faiths. This is America's grace (pp.549-550).

A web of interlocking personal relationships... relationships where we honor and value the gifts and the differences we are bound to have, but where we value one another as children of God.

Another way we Presbyterians might consider expressing it these days would be like this, “For where two or three are gathered in my name...” or, where those who had once been estranged and separated from one another now recognize who their neighbors are, or, when those who have never talked to one another now covenant to be conversation partners because of their oneness in Christ, “There I am also.”

Amen.