

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Year A Proper 18
Exodus 12:1-14, Matthew 18:15-20
September 4, 2011

In the name of the one God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I love it when the good news of Jesus Christ comes by way of a step-by-step instruction manual. It is so refreshing.

In today's gospel story, there are no parables to unwrap, no symbols to digest, and no confused disciples. Instead, we have a series of "if-then" scenarios – clear, succinct, simple.

Exactly what we need to feed the last sermon of the summer!

Take just the first instruction:
If someone sins against you, go and talk to him or her.

Easy - right?

This act involves only two people, one conversation, one step.

Yes, I know there are other steps here outlined by Jesus. And they get a bit more complicated. I get that if the first step does not work, there is more you need to do. You have to schedule a time when someone else is available, set up a meeting, coordinate calendars. And then – if the conflict isn't resolved after the first two steps, you have to involve an entire group of people. Now the ante is upped! At this point the cat is out of the bag. More and more people are involved and the level of intensity is high.

The entire process Jesus outlines is wise though; he knows that conflict between two people can infect an entire community.

We see it in our families, in our schools, in our churches, in our politics, in our world.

At times, we need to go through all three steps in order to resolve a conflict.

But, much of the time, a conflict can be resolved - even transformed - if we take the initiative to begin at the most basic level.

Someone hurts you. Go and talk to them.

Directly.

Jesus could not be any clearer.

Jesus gives us a lot of advice during his ministry – he commands us to do a lot of things – but this command – this one is one I wish people would follow more often.

The world would be so much less gossipy, so much less passive aggressive, so much less confusing, if we would all just heed Jesus' advice here.

I know I am not the only one here who values one-on-one direct communication between two people in conflict.

And I know I am not the only one who values it and ALSO finds it a hard expectation to meet.

How many of us would rather not confront someone who has wronged us? How many would rather ignore the person, dismiss them, focus on other friends – friends with highly developed social skills, friends who actually care about us; friends who would not hurt us; friends who aren't so immature.

How many of us - if a crime were committed against us or someone we love – would simply want to let the courts take care of the situation.

How many of us would rather not face the pain of what happened?

How many of us would rather not be vulnerable in front of another?

How many of us would rather not risk the intimate opening of ourselves that real forgiveness requires.

Here, as he describes the very first step, Jesus introduces us to what this process is all about: forgiveness.

Jesus will expand on the theme next week as this part of the Gospel continues.

And I am sure Susan will address it as our church, community, country and world pauses to reflect on the tenth anniversary of the attacks on the pentagon and world trade center.

For now, Jesus speaks to us at a very personal level: If someone hurts you, go to that person. Talk about what happened. Open yourself up to him or her. Because, you see, if that person listens to you, you have regained a friend who may have been lost. A friend you may not know had existed in the first place.

The context for this section of the gospel is strife between two people who are part of a community of believers – part of the assembly. But I think Jesus' advice is just as important beyond the assembly, beyond the church.

As we look at our relationships and at our world we see what happens if forgiveness is not practiced, if reconciliation is not achieved.

We can also see when healing and reconciliation is realized.

Some of you may have read an article this week on the CNN website that I found especially relevant given the Gospel this morning.

The article talks about the mother of Zacarias Moussaoui, who you might remember is the one person convicted in the 9-11 attacks – the so called 20th hijacker. The article speaks about the life his mother led prior to 9-11 and her blindness to her son's growing extremism.

What I was most interested in was the part of the article that talks about her work with the Forgiveness Project which seeks to connect victims of violent crimes with their perpetrators in order to forge bonds of reconciliation. If you think what Jesus asks today is easy, go to the Forgiveness Project website and read the stories contained therein!

This part of the CNN article, which you may want to look up when you return home today, describes the reconciliation of two moms, Moussaoui's mother, Aicha el-Wafi, and Phyllis Rodriguez, a native New Yorker who lost her 31-year-old son Greg in the World Trade Center.

"Rodriguez has written of her admiration for el-Wafi:

The day I met Aicha was the day that changed my life because it changed my direction emotionally.

It was the beginning of my learning that someone like Aicha, who has suffered so much, could still be emotionally generous.

It brought out the generosity in me and I felt better for it...

When I watched Zacarias at the trial my heart was broken because I could not look at him as a stranger.

I saw him as the son of my friend Aicha."

You read these words of Rodriguez and you hear the echoes of the Gospel: *First go and see the person one on one.*

"That needs courage; it also needs prayer and humility...[And] if it works...then it's wonderful," says NT Wright in his commentary on this passage. "You've gained a brother or sister says Jesus, and that really is what it feels like (35)."

As Wright goes on to note, "Reconciliation often creates a closer bond that you had in the first place (35)."

And to be sure, this reconciliation does not occur because of one person's initiative.

Or even the commitment of two people to work things out.

Yes, these things are necessary. And with them, I would argue you might get pretty close to resolving a conflict.

However, if we invite God into the conflict and into the process of its resolution, we have a better chance of having the conflict - and having ourselves - transformed.

Jesus says, "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."

When hearts and relationships are broken, God is there holding the pieces together. God is right there in the midst of the pain. God is right there with you.

What Jesus says in the Gospel, as Wright points out, is not just a promise that we will sense this presence of God with us.

It's a promise and a warning (!)

"It's a promise and a warning that he will see and know the innermost truth of everyone's heart. If we take that seriously, engaging in reconciliation will still be costly. But it will always be done in real hope, with joy waiting round the corner for those who persevere (37)."

The promise comes with a warning.

The process is costly.

The reward is joy.

The process is simple.

It begins with two people.

It requires only one step.

Right now I imagine there is someone in your life who has hurt you.

Someone in your life – maybe here in this church – who has sinned against you.

Someone who has wronged you.

Jesus is asking you to take a step towards that person this morning.

For you, for them, for the community of which you are a part.

Will you hold on to the promise offered by God?

Will you risk being vulnerable?

Will you risk exposing your hope?

Will you seek the joy reconciliation will bring?

Will you?

Will you, with God's help?

Amen.

Sources:

Matthew For Everyone Part Two, Tom Wright, 2002.

<http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/europe/09/01/september.11.moussaoui.mother/index.html?iref=allsearch>