

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 18
Year A

Congregations and Conflict
[RCL] Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; 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." (Matt. 18:15)

Congregations are communities of people. They usually function well. Some have very strong central authorities, and others work better with leadership by consensus. And all of them, from time to time, have conflicts that arise between members.

Speed Leas, a well-known expert in church conflict resolution, identifies levels of conflict which range from "Level One: a problem to solve," to "Level Five: intractable situations where personalities have become the focus and energy centers on the elimination of the persons involved." In this extreme condition, it is often necessary to bring in an outside person to deal with the explosive situation.¹

Keeping congregations healthy is a mutual responsibility that requires the participation of everyone. In unhealthy churches, people often create a toxic triangle made up of the victim, the persecutor, and the rescuer. Once the triangle is established, it becomes more difficult to resolve a condition or address an issue. Often, the pastor is drawn in and expected to rescue everyone, but sometimes the pastor is the victim or even the persecutor. Wise leaders try to avoid getting triangulated so they can help resolve the situation from a detached perspective, but it isn't always possible.

In Matthew's text for today's Gospel, Jesus addresses personal conflict by urging people to resolve their differences directly first, and then, if necessary, to bring others into the discussion. We aren't given details or examples. Jesus's mission is to create committed communities of believers that will witness God's love to a battered and broken world.

There are some basic premises at work here: One is that Jesus teaches that God loves all God's children and that our need to be right is not always helpful. The organization for families of alcoholics, Al-Anon, teaches this premise and reminds its members that all of us, including the alcoholic, have a Higher Power who is not taking sides.

¹ Much of Leas's material is available on the Internet and from his books available through the Alban Institute.

The congregation is a place where people can work out differences in community by listening as much as lecturing, by understanding as much as demanding to be understood.

Another premise of Jesus is that healthy leaders are loving and primarily concerned about others. A small church in the Middle South has developed a strong core of healthy leadership over several decades. It carefully steers troubled people into places where they are loved and cared about, without allowing them to become leaders who, because of their own pain and suffering, could become toxic to others. This works, not because there is some secret group that puts people in their place, but because the entire leadership core cares about all the members, and helps troubled newcomers and long-time members fit in without being tagged as problem people.

The opposite situation is also common: a church where conflict is the main menu whenever the community is gathered. A small rural church was beset with conflict among its members, and quite proud of the fact. A number of diocesan clergy had taken turns at trying to help resolve the conflicts and were sent packing. The lifestyle of conflict became obvious to one pastor on a day when a new family showed up and two people got into a verbal spat in front of them. The family left, never to return. The pastor tried to point out that this behavior was damaging, but the people involved said this was who they were – like it or leave it! It was only after years of this conflict that a faithful and loving priest came to live in their community and slowly began to help them learn new behavior, mainly by modeling it himself.

If you are listening at this point you have likely been thinking of how your own faith community compares with these anecdotes. There are countless ways to evaluate the health of a congregation, and some are better than others. Every faith community has its own style of life that is built into its identity and history, and it can be difficult to change if it is unhealthy.

The passage from Matthew for this Sunday concludes with a well-known teaching: “Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, I will be in the midst of them.” This is always heard as a reassurance that God desires us to be in community, whether small or large. Being alone is not necessarily bad, but it can lead to isolation and arrogance. The Divine Triune God is a God of relationships, a dynamic force that empowers our spirituality and grounds us in faith. The Trinity models what our relationships are to be: fully in unity and desiring of diversity.

Depression in congregations often comes from our tendency to allow only like-minded or similar types of people into the community of believers. Things become static and nothing challenges us to grow and become more like what God desires the Church to be. The healing of depression in a congregation comes when new relationships are formed. Some smaller congregations are organized into clusters or regional groups with shared leadership for that very reason. Vitality comes when new people enter the scene, new ideas are introduced, and the same old way of doing things is transformed.

Jesus does not envision the Church to be a place of contention and conflict. But we know stories of his disciples and from the Book of Acts that the Early Church experienced a lot of tension and disagreement, even among its apostolic leaders. However, as the church expanded into the Greco-Roman civilization in the West, it had to take on and embrace different norms and customs, as it does even today. The challenge for the Church will always be to find and implement new ways of proclaiming the Good News. When we are engaged in that enterprise, when we are more concerned about serving others than survival, there will be less conflict and more delight in the people that God sends to us and sends us to. The health of any congregation rests on its sense of mission, and its willingness to be flexible and welcoming, as Christ welcomes each of us. Amen.

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