

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
Sept 7, 2008, Pentecost Year A
Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus says that we must change and become like little children if we want to enter the kingdom of heaven. Last Sunday, the children of St. Thomas's presented me with their advice to a new priest-in-charge. St. Stephen's is getting ready to start some great children's ministries here, and before we get to my sermon, I thought you might like to hear the kids' advice:

Trust God.

God loves you even in hard times when you made the wrong choice.

Brush your teeth.

Listen to the people.

Smile.

Be helpful and kind.

Take a bath.

Have a great time.

Think up good prayers.

When it comes to children, be friendly.

Go see people in the hospital or who are sad. If they like video games, be sure and play video games with them.

Speak strongly.

Don't give up.

Try different things to get more people in the church.

Pray and then pray some more.

Think about a lot of things.

Be friends with everybody.

Be yourself. You can't be anyone else anyway.

Be patient.

Remember God loves you and that he will always be with you to guide you through all your actions.

Don't eat bad food.

Give out Bibles and tell people to read them.

Do different kinds of sermons.

Make friends with preschoolers.

Make a difference.

When you get tired and worn out, go home and go to bed.

When you get sad, tell a friend, and then go cry.

Listen to God.

Have fun at your new church.

When you disagree with people, tell them “that’s what you think and this is what I think.”

Go to parties and visit at people’s houses.

Believe what you teach.

Do the job God gave you to do.

Tell people, “God loves you.”

So, people of St. Stephen’s, if you remember nothing else from this morning, remember this: God loves you.

A few weeks ago, I was telling a friend how excited I was about my first Eucharist with you, what an extraordinary Christian community you are, how exciting it would be to enjoy this fresh new beginning, how lovely it would be to worship out in God’s creation with the sun shining and the birds singing. She asked, “What are the Bible passages for the day?” I said, “I haven’t looked at the lectionary yet, but I am happy to preach on anything other than church conflict!” And then I looked at today’s gospel reading. Church conflict.

I considered finding something else to talk about in one of these scriptures, but in the end decided to go ahead and talk about church conflict today, and then we can move on to other topics in the future.

It is important to notice that in this passage Jesus is not talking about all disagreements. Jesus is not even talking here about another member of the church who is engaging in behavior you consider sinful. In this passage, Jesus says, “If another member

of the church sins against you.” Jesus is talking specifically about times in which the sin of another church member hurts you.

Christians hurting each other and sinning against each other is not a new thing. It has been going on in every generation since the time of Jesus. In heaven we will be able to enjoy each other without hurting each other, but on earth we have to do the best we can with what we've got. So when another Christian sins against us, we should not be so horrified that we give up on the Church, or, God forbid, so horrified that we give up on faith. Sin happens.

When someone has sinned against us, our natural inclination is usually to find other people we can complain to about what a jerk that person is. Or our natural inclination may be to nurse a silent resentment about that person. Jesus teaches us to do something that seems obvious, but is very difficult in reality: to go to the other person when the two of you are alone and talk about it directly.

I can recall times in my own life when someone has spoken to me directly about something I have done that has hurt them, and I was able to apologize, be forgiven, and have the relationship restored. That is a blessed thing.

One of the things that attracted me to you is the honest and open way you talk to each other about difficult topics. I admire that you have written this down as one of the ideals that guides your community life. I have seen it in action as I watched the open and respectful way you spoke to each other on Thursday evening. I am confident that you will speak to me with the same openness and honesty you show to each other. I trust that if I do anything that hurts you or sins against you, you will come to me and tell me about it directly. As my husband can attest, I don't always pick up on hints, so I appreciate directness.

Jesus tells us: if the one-on-one conversation isn't enough, get help from one or two others, or from the church as a whole. But there are times when these steps are not enough. It is at those times that we reach the difficult verse, “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Jesus is not talking about separating from people with whom we disagree, even on matters of doctrine or practice. Jesus is talking here about people who sin against you.

There are some times when the only way to keep from getting hurt over and over and over is to get away from the person who is hurting you. I have witnessed my share of arguments among children. They are extremely similar to the arguments I have witnessed, or participated in, among adults. What starts out as an argument over an issue can descend very quickly into an attack on the other person. It is stunning to me that at this level of argument, no matter what the issue started out being, and no matter what words they use, people consistently say the same three things to each other over and over:

1. I am right, and you are wrong.
2. I am the good one, and you are very bad.
3. The problems we have are all your fault.

At this level of conflict, all arguments can be reduced to a single four-word sentence: “I’m better than you.”

The variations are numerous. In some cases, it is “I’m more responsible than you” or “I’m smarter than you” or “I’m less selfish than you.” A favorite in church conflicts is, “I’m holier than you.” In other cases, it is “I’m more considerate than you,” even when this is screamed in a fit of rage.

I have never seen someone in the midst of this kind of heated argument suddenly respond to these accusations by exclaiming, “Aha! Now I see it! You really are a better person than I am! Thank you for pointing this out to me!” At this level of argument, it is simply one person hurting another. So Jesus says, if a member of the church still keeps sinning against you, still keeps hurting you, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

The author Speed Leas at the Alban Institute has specialized in researching conflict, particularly church conflict, for decades. He writes about the four stages of conflict.¹ The first stage is “problems to solve.” In the first stage of conflict, people have different ideas about how to solve a problem, but are willing to work together to find a solution. Conflicts at this stage can very often be resolved successfully.

But sometimes the conflict escalates. The fourth stage of conflict is “fight or flight.” Leas writes, “Participants do not believe the “others” can or will change, so their

¹ Quotations and summaries are taken from www.alban.org/conversation

objective is to hurt and/or remove these others from the congregation.” The good news is that when a stage four conflict and a separation have occurred, there is an opportunity for both sides to stop hurting each other, and get on with their lives. This is the kind of situation Jesus is talking about in today’s gospel reading.

But as Leas continued his research, he was saddened to discover that in some cases, the conflict did not end with the separation. In some cases, even after the separation occurred, participants escalated the conflict on to a fifth stage.

- Leas writes that in the fifth stage, “the participants’ objective is to destroy the other. The conflict is framed in terms of universal principles and eternal causes. The parties believe the stakes are so high that they are morally bound to continue fighting. Prolonged conflict is therefore viewed as a necessity. To cease fighting is not seen as an option.”

The message of today’s sermon is: God offers all of us the option to cease fighting. God offers all of us the option to stop hurting each other. God offers all of us the option to heal, even to love.

Perhaps you have been hurt by some things that have been written about you or about people you care about. As people read these things, people can see for themselves whether they are saying,

“We are right and you are wrong.”

“We are the good ones, and you are very bad.”

“The problems we have are all your fault.”

Or the all-purpose argument, “We’re better than you.”

Some people are 100% convinced that by saying the things they say about you, they are carrying out God’s will. Some people started out thinking that the cause against you was noble and righteous, an expression of God’s will, but now have moments when they wonder whether all the damage done to relationships was truly necessary. Some people are simply tired of the conflict.

I do not want church schisms to happen. But schism happens. And I hope that the separation that has happened means it is no longer necessary for people to keep saying, over and over again, “we’re better than you.”

Every one of us has hurt someone in the heat of argument. Every one of us has said, in one way or another, “I’m better than you.” But God can give every one of us the grace to stop.

If someone says to us, “we’re better than you” we do not need to respond with a counter-attack, “no, we’re better than you .” We can simply choose not to participate in that kind of argument. Instead of saying “we are the good ones, and you are very bad” we can simply be good.

Julia Child was a much better cook than I am. And if she had met me, I expect that she would feel no need to tell me, “I’m a better cook than you.” Instead, she would just make something delicious, and say, “Here, taste some of this.” And I would say, “Mmmm, this is really delicious! You are a wonderful cook!”

Fred Astaire did not go around telling other people he was a better dancer than they were. He simply held out his hand to a talented, beautiful woman, and began to dance with her, to the delight of everyone who saw them.

Jackie Robinson did not say negative things about other people. Some people told him he shouldn’t play baseball in the same league as white people because he wasn’t as good as white people. Some people said that racial integration was against the will of God. Some people said that to allow a black man to play baseball with whites was violating centuries of tradition. Some people said that we should follow the old rules. Some people said that baseball was supposed to be a place of unity, and that a black person should not be allowed to play with whites until the time that the whole society had reached consensus on the role of blacks. Jackie Robinson did not insult people, even when they insulted him. He just hit the ball out of the park.

So let’s feed each other and the world with delicious meals. Let’s dance to the beautiful music. Let’s play ball.

After all, how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? He welcomed them.
 Jesus welcomes you.
 The Episcopal church welcomes you.
 God loves you.