

Matthew 18: 15-20

¹⁵ "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. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."



Today we begin a new series entitled, "No Fair". Over the course of this three-week series we will look at Jesus' plan for settling conflict in the church, at how real grace means losing count of wrongs, and at how we do not get what we deserve, receiving grace instead. In this series, we will challenge our ideas about church life, forgiveness, and grace. We will look at the gospel as something that is not just personal but social as well. We will look at our call as followers of Christ to model the kind of selfless love that Jesus lived out. Let us pray.

We get the series started today tackling “How to Fight Like a Christian”. So, to begin today, let us consider what might lead one Christian to fight against another Christian. This is, after all, the scenario that Jesus opens this passage of scripture with when He says, “*If another member of the church sins against you...*”. Jesus usually speaks in abstract and sometimes hard to understand imagery, most often using parables to teach a point to His listeners. Even the disciples often walk away scratching their heads, trying to figure out just what Jesus is talking about. But there is no fuzz or fluff in today’s opening verses. Jesus gives a pretty straight forward, step by step, accounting of what to do when a fellow Christian sins against you.



So, what might lead one Christian to fight against another Christian? Please find a space on your bulletin and write down a thing or two that Christians might fight about today. It may even be something you have fought about with another Christian. Rest assured - you will not be asked to share these things out loud or to come forward to confess at the altar rail if what you write is personal. But to help you frame today’s message, please do take a moment and write down a couple things that Christians could fight about. Thank you.

As we look back over the course of Christian history, there have been some pretty good fights. The one that looms largest was called the Reformation. In the 1500’s a priest and monk named Martin Luther nailed a piece of paper to the door of the campus



chapel in Wittenberg, naming 95 things that needed addressed concerning the church. His primary concern was around indulgences or the sale of forgiveness of sins. At this point, only the Catholic Church existed so his fight was really with the Pope. Things got ugly before they got better and pretty soon Luther was excommunicated and there were two churches – the Catholic Church and the Protestant church. This pattern of disagreeing over doctrine or how to baptize or... has led to many splits in the church. Today, there are over 200 major denominations in the US. If that surprises you, it might surprise you even more to know that there are 11 variations of Methodism in the US alone.



Sometimes churches and Christians fight amongst themselves over smaller matters than the Reformation. Yet to those involved, the issue seems very large and often almost comes to feel like life or death. If you look at what you wrote on your bulletin, perhaps these things feel like that to you. I have been involved in a few church fights over the years. And each time it has cost the church and it has cost some individuals as well. In every instance, there were feelings hurt and in all three cases some people left that church and sought other communities of faith. Yes, it happens even here at Winner United Methodist Church. But to avoid any rehashing of the past or the dredging up of hard feelings here, I will illustrate how this happens with a few examples from my past.

In the late 1980's Kristin and I were attending the church we grew up in and were married in. An idea was brought forth to air condition the Sanctuary. The cost was estimated at about \$300,000. At the same time, our sister church in inner city Hartford was really struggling to keep the doors open. The neighborhood had grown poorer and poorer and, consequently, what people could give became less and less. Some argued that the \$300,000 would be better spent helping that church than installing air conditioning for those three really hot Sundays each year. Emotions ran hot and in the end the church decided to install air conditioning. Kristin and I were among those who chose to worship elsewhere.



A few years later, we had relocated to South Dakota and the church in Rapid City wanted to start a contemporary worship service. Some people felt that drums and guitars and all that simply did not belong in a worship service. Others felt it did. We began a contemporary service in the "Upper Room" that ran concurrently with the 8:30 traditional service that was happening in the Sanctuary.



Some were still upset about the new style of worship, but it was up there in that other room, so it was tolerable. After about a year, however, the contemporary service had outgrown the Upper Room. As it became more and more crowded, the church leaders realized that something had to be done soon. The decision was made to move most of our Sunday School programming to Wednesday nights and to have three services in the Sanctuary on Sunday mornings. But that involved a change in worship times for two of the three services as well as

bringing another style of worship into the Sanctuary. One or the other or both of these changes were more than some could tolerate and they chose to attend another church.

The last experience that I had involving a church fight was over who was welcome to the dinner table and who was not. At the church in Rapid City, when we shifted most of our Christian Education to Wednesday night, we also began serving a meal to help families get from sports or other activities to church. A year or two later we invited the ladies from the nearby women's shelter to join us for the meal and classes. A few ladies from the church were leading a Bible study there once a week and this invitation was the next step. But pretty soon others heard about the 'free meal' and our crowd got a little rougher. The issue came up concerning some of the people who were attending – some were intoxicated or high and some were unchurched youth that were disruptive and occasionally destructive. The pastor insisted that all people were welcome – regardless of any factors. Security guards were added but some parents still felt unsafe taking their young children to dinner in that environment. As problems began to occur in the parking lot, for example, some simply chose not to come anymore. Others were vocal about the lack of safety and eventually stopped coming too. Slowly but surely the dinner became more guests than church members. Eventually the decision was made to just have classes on Wednesday nights and most who were left were happy with that decision. But over the course of the six or seven years, several families had left the church.





In each of these cases, most of the people who left the church left because what was being done or decided upon was not what they thought was 'right'. And we all surely like to be right, don't we? But some of the people left because of the way they were treated or ignored or ridiculed or ... They could live with the decision but simply could not get past the lack of love and consideration in how the decisions were made or how they were treated in the process. This is what Paul is addressing in our scripture today. He is addressing those times when we as Christians sin against our fellow Christians. There will always be difference of opinion and differences in how we think this or that should be done or handled.

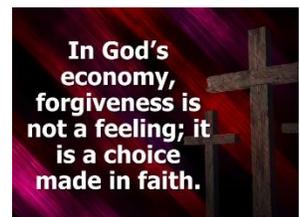
Jesus knew that there would be in-fighting and that we would even sin against one another. Jesus is not denying these facts. What He is addressing is how we treat one another. It is not that we disagree, it is how we disagree. And at times our emotions can get the best of us. We say something we should not or we become stubborn and close our minds off to what the other person is trying to say. Worse yet we can digress into gossip and name calling and all kinds of unloving behaviors. Unfortunately, we have all probably been there and done that. What Jesus is saying is that it CANNOT stop there. We cannot have relationship issues within the church and still be the loving body of Christ.

I think a good parallel is marriage. There have been times in my marriage when I have hurt Kristin or been hurt by her. Almost all married couples have had the same experiences. It may have been with words or maybe it was something one

did or did not do. And at times that has festered. The hurt or the anger was greater than the ability to forgive and to heal the broken relationship. So we walked on egg shells for a day or three. We avoided conversation and found lots of other things to keep busy. Eventually an apology came and things were made right again. Love again was the overarching guide in the marriage.

But in church life, we don't have to be around that person who hurt us or whom we disagree with. Churches can be the most passive, indirect places in the world. If someone has hurt us or sinned against us, we can just avoid that person, right? Or we can just allow that anger to smolder just below the surface, as long as it never bubbles over, right? Or we can whisper with our friends behind closed doors but act all loving when out in the open, right? No, no, and no! In our passage today, Jesus gives us practical and straight forward instructions on how to handle it when one Christian sins against another Christian. Make no mistake, when we harbor anger or resentment or hurt or envy or any other similar emotion, we are definitely living in sin. When we allow something to become a barrier that keeps us from fully loving all members of the body of Christ, we are holding onto our sin.

In the Bible, we have a great example of what forgiveness should look like. We need to begin by looking at how God forgives us. Author Brian Erickson wrote this about forgiveness: "*In God's economy, forgiveness is not a feeling; it is a choice made in faith*". If we wait until we 'feel' like forgiving someone, then that moment will never

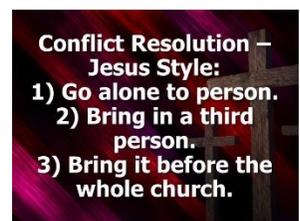


come. Offering forgiveness is a choice that is made. To help, Jesus offers three easy steps for conflict resolution. Please be aware that we can each be on either side of these steps. At times, we have sinned against another and, at times, we have been sinned against.



Jesus says to first go directly to that person and to speak to them alone. We may have been the one who wronged another or we may have been the one who feels wronged. It does not matter. Jesus says that when we are aware of a conflict, to go to the other person and to resolve it. Be open and honest and seek reconciliation. Offer a heart-felt apology or accept one.

Sometimes we must go on to step two. Sometimes the other person does not see how they sinned against you or they cannot get past it to accept your apology. In either case, Jesus says to bring along another who will help you both find the middle ground. When we involve others, according to Jesus, we bring in other perspectives and that helps us in our conflict resolution. A third party can often see both sides and offer a third viewpoint that brings some resolution to the conflict. If steps one and two fail, Jesus advises us to bring the conflict before the whole church. Hopefully conflict can be resolved before this stage, but ultimately Jesus calls on the church to be the peacemaker, to be the mediator that resolves conflict in a loving and caring way.



Our passage today closes with these two verses:

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.

We must first remember that these verses are spoken within the context of conflict mediation. Remember, Jesus knew we would have conflict and disagreements from time to time in the church. He knew that there would be infighting and that we would sin against one another. So, He gave us a plan to follow for when these things happened. Jesus promises to be present when two or more are gathered in His name while having hard conversations and while seeking reconciliation. For Jesus to be present, those conversations must be direct and honest and the conversation must be based on accountability and transparency. When we fail to have direct and honest and open and transparent conversations, Jesus will not be in the midst of these conversations.

We know from experience that there will be times when we sin against one another and when we need to have those conversations with one another. When those moments come, may we remember Jesus' guidelines for how to handle conflict in Christian love and may we rely on His promise to be present when we have those conversations. With Jesus at our center, we will find that we get along pretty well and that we will find reconciliation when we keep Jesus at the center of our conversations and conflicts. Let us pray.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Why do some Christians fight with or sin against one another? In general, what leads to disagreements rather than conversations?
- 2) Think about past church conflicts that you have been involved in. What did you 'learn' and how would you handle the situation differently now?
- 3) For you, how is forgiveness a choice that must be made? Do you have any relationships that need reconciliation? Pray for guidance to begin healing.