“Keep at it”

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Matthew 18:15-20

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***15“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. 16But 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. 17If that person 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. 18Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19Again, 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.******20For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”***

I never buy books with numbers in the title, unless they are part of a numbered sequence of detective novels, like James Patterson’s novels with Maxine Paetro, The Women’s Murder Club series which is up to 24 (and mysteriously also includes some half numbers), or Janet Evanovich whose Stephanie Plum detective series is now up to 30. I find it’s a great way for me to remember where I am in the series!

It’s not the numbers themselves that I object to. It’s the claims they make. In particular, I object to self-help books that have titles like 25 Secrets to Success, or The Five Keys to Mindful Loving, 150 Ways to Manage Emotions, 30 Day Self Improvement Workbook, Six Keys to Unlocking Your Full Potential With the Subconscious Mind, or my favorite, a sneaky work around for not having an actual number in the title, A Weekend to Change Your Life. A weekend. So is that two days? Three? Anyone who has ever tried to change anything in their life knows it can’t happen in just a weekend.

It's not the self-help part of these books that I don’t like; I actually like self-help books in many cases – it’s the audacity they have to claim to *how many* steps, days, statements, thoughts, secrets it takes to make personal development changes. Even the book “10 Books that screwed up the world” makes me say, “only 10?” How do they come up with these numbers? Who decides? Why limit seekers of any help to any number?

I bring that up because according to one commentator, today’s text is item number four, out of five items that Jesus’ tells us are important for living and dealing with relationships within a community. No!! You just can’t quantify Jesus’ lessons to us into a neat box.

In this 18th chapter of Matthew Jesus first says that we should be humble and teachable. Second we should try not to be stumbling blocks to one another. Third, we should care for one another. Fourth – from today – we should be “persistent in attending to situations involving conflict.”1 And fourth, in next week’s lectionary passage, we should be prepared to offer each other forgiveness, over and over again; as many as “seventy-times-seven” times.

And yet, there’s always an “and yet…” realizing that this scripture we read is part of a larger whole does give us a different perspective. Seeing a larger perspective gives us enough background to know that Jesus instructions are specifically given in this case to a community of faith. A community of faith is hopefully made up of people who desire harmony, desire peaceful outcomes, desire connection and are not willing to walk away.

A community who wants these things will not read today’s text as the clobber text it has been mistakenly turned into a law and judgement text.

The children’s magazine “Highlights” has been around for many years. When I was a kid, there were lessons taught by way of a kind of comic strip. They would show a situation, like a grown up inviting you to have a cookie from a plate of cookies. The two characters were named Goofus, and Galant. Goofus always did things socially incorrect. Galant always got it right. Goofus, when presented with a plate of cookies, would choose the best looking cookie maybe on the other side of the plate; but Galant would politely choose the cookie closest to him.

If Goofus was hearing today’s text, he would hear it as someone who wanted to win an argument. ***15“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.*** ***If you are listened to, you have regained that one.*** Goofus thinks this is permission to be a tattle tale! If someone picks on you, tell them to stop it.***16But 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.*** If they don’t stop, go find one or two others and tell them.***17If that person 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.*** If they don’t listen, tell even more people. If the offender refuses to listen to even all those people, then treat them as outsiders.

Goofus is thinking only of himself and his personal gain.

Galant on the other hand, thinks of others. Here’s how he would read this text.

***15“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.***  Galant knows that if you have a conflict with someone, you take it to them first and try to resolve things between the two of you. ***If you are listened to, you have regained that one. 16But 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.*** If the two of you can’t resolve the trouble, don’t stop trying to be resolved. Take along two or three who will listen with open minds to both sides, and support you in the attempt to come to a resolution.***17If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church,*** If the solution is still not at hand, refuse to give up. Take up the issue with everyone involved and include the leaders who can help. ***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.***If we are still unable to come to a resolution, treat those with whom you disagree by treating them as if they are those without the same information and experiences as you.

Of course in real life no conflicts are as easy and binary as deciding who is Galant and who is Goofus. Each one is a conflict is probably some of each, and then we mix in our own background and knowledge and fears and insecurities. The point of the passage is that when we try to address a conflict there are some things we have to keep in mind before we do anything.

The first is, it is not helpful to approach conflict resolution with the goal of being proven to be correct. We can’t hope for resolution, if being correct is the only outcome we are willing to accept. What occurs after an approach like that may end the conflict, but it does not bring about a resolution.

Another, is to be willing to consider all of the unspoken or unseen elements at play in the situation.

When I first read this, I thought of the #MeToo movement and how the power dynamics in each circumstance prevented the approach in the biblical text from being productive. The women who went to their accuser first, and then went to a larger audience, and then an even larger audience in an effort to find justice, were never going to find justice. The power dynamics between the accused and the accuser were too great. Each voice did not hold equal weight. Both parties were not hoping for a resolution for the well-being of the whole community, the powerful side only wanted their own well-being.

Between power dynamics, safety and access, this biblical process for conflict resolution does not fit all situations. I think of those that don’t have a voice. I think of those who are in domestic violence situations. I think of those who are at an unfair advantage because of language or culture or access or vulnerability.

The good news in today’s text then only happens when we really hear the last line, ***20For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”*** If those in conflict do not share a belief in and love of Jesus, believing that Jesus is there among them doesn’t carry much meaning. Inside a community of faith however, that line means everything.

Conflict resolution is by definition an awkward place to be. There’s the conflict, there’s the difficulty of being in the presence of the other, and maybe there’s the worry that one will be blamed and shamed in the attempt to resolve the conflict. But if we believe that Jesus is there, even if we just pretend that Jesus is there, there is a different tone to our voices, a different kind of humility – the kind that brings strength not shame – that comes out in us. If Jesus is here among us the outcome is that the body be healthy, not just one part of the body.

This is where what we believe on a personal level affects the life and health of our communities of faith. We need to build for one another, a level of trust, *because of* our love of God, that gives us actual experiences of a better life. Only then will we know what it feels like to have Christ among us when two or three or more are gathered.

Let us pray.

1<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23/commentary-on-matthew-1815-20-6>