

You will know by now that for our services on Wednesdays, I follow the Sunday lectionary readings. Therefore I don't choose them. I simply accept them and preach on them. Today's passage is not an easy one to talk about, and yet it is important to remain faithful to the word of God that is set before us. Today is all about dealing with conflict in the church family.

You've probably all heard the phrase that you can't choose your family but you can choose your friends. And therefore from time to time there are members of my family who can really get on my goat. In the life of the Church Family, there too can be disagreements, but you can't choose your church family either. And it's not meant to be perfect. So this morning's gospel reading, Jesus teaches on what to do when conflict arises in the Church family. In this morning's reading, Jesus would have us do 3 things that may not ALWAYS lead to peace with people – but at least we will have peace in our hearts knowing we did what God expected us to do. 3 things.

1. First, He wants us to Be Proactive in settling conflict. Proactive. Jesus said in v. 15, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and tell him his fault." You can't get any clearer than that.

Typically, when WE have been offended, we EXPECT the OFFENDER to come to US. So WHY would Jesus tell us that the obligation is on OUR part when we didn't do anything wrong? I can think of three reasons:

First, because it is pride in us that demands an apology. And because PRIDE is the exact OPPOSITE of what we OUGHT to be and do, Jesus says we are to take the first step towards reconciliation.

Second, because the Lord demonstrates grace so freely towards US, when we are unwilling to forgive, we fail to see our OWN sin – the many times WE have failed - and how often we have been forgiven. Grace demands us to release people from the debt they owe us – Just like Jesus did for US.

And THIRD, we ought to be proactive in settling conflicts because JESUS TOLD US TO. It is NOT a matter of emotion – or whether we FEEL like it – it is a matter of OBEDIENCE.

So it's our responsibility to make the first move, don't wait.

2. Second, Be Private in settling conflict. Private. Jesus said in v. 15, "go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother." I wonder how many folks we have LOST because we failed to keep our conflicts private??

You see in keeping things private, it means we show respect to the individual. It says we think about them first rather than spreading gossip.

It also gives them a fair chance to explain why they have behaved the way they did. Have you ever considered that there are 2 sides to every story? They may not have any idea that they have caused offence, so a private chat can really clear the air.

So that's being proactive and being private, and then finally.

3. we should also Be Pure. When we have handled things the Lord's way, if the person who has offended us is unrepentant, THAT'S when you involve someone else and bring a WITNESS with you. Jesus said, "But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

WHY is this step important?? Sometimes it's good to have another person with you who only wants peace and unity, who can keep things calm – who can be impartial and see the situation from both sides. What's more, those people who have no interest in peaceful resolutions can make up things about what you said and how you said it. Having another set of ears in the conversation covers you in the case of slander. Because, trust me, not everyone is going to respond positively when you speak to them about an offence.

Unfortunately at times in conflict resolution, we only deal with the one to one discussions. We don't take another with us with the hope that something can be resolved. But what definitely does not happen is that if there is still no resolution, that the issue is brought before the church congregation. And yet that is what God's word instructs. Unfortunately this leads to issues festering and animosity setting in.

But where issues follow these steps, and after all this, the person is STILL unrepentant, it is CLEAR that NOT ONLY have they rejected YOU – then Jesus says in verse 17 "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." In other words they are no longer a part of the church community. Now that might seem very harsh, but folks if a person is actively damaging the Church family, then we all have to think about whether it is preventing the body from moving forward in God's will. Thankfully, offences don't usually get to this stage, but we do have to keep striving for God's Church to seek holiness and Unity.

Finally, reassuringly, Jesus teaches that where two people who have their differences in church bring God into the centre of their disputes, God promises to be right there in the centre of everything, to guide them and help them be reconciled. We don't have to face these disputes on our own folks.

If and hopefully not too often we face conflicts in the church family, may we remember this approach from Jesus to step forward and be proactive in seeing a resolve, to respect each other and discuss these things privately, and then thirdly seek purity and unity for the wider church.

Remember that as a Church family, we have to learn how to live with each other, and inevitably when dispute arises, God wants to be included so that love abounds.