



09/06/2020 Reconciliation in Jesus
Ezekiel 33:7-11; Psalm 119:33-40; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

There is something about wearing certain clothes that makes you feel like a different person. Maybe it is a power suit. Maybe it is a uniform. Maybe it is your Sunday's best. We put on what helps us feel good and confident. In today's passage from Romans, Paul tells us to "put on the armor of light". Two verses later he says to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ".¹

In the early church, the new converts were baptized naked and then clothed in a white robe to symbolize putting on Christ. As Christians we "wear" our baptism, which shapes our identity. The apostles comment abundantly on their understanding of Jesus' own instructions to live by his word, to dwell in the word, to let the word take hold of us and so on.²

We may say with full confidence that putting on Christ means to live by his Spirit and the values of the kingdom. Paul reminds us that when we submit to the Spirit, we find love, joy, patience, kindness, life, and peace.³ Conversely, Paul tells us, those who are possessed by the spirit of this world, or even worse, by a mean spirit, are always afraid.⁴ Fear compels one to always be on the lookout for danger and expect to be taken advantage of, because a worldly spirit sees corruption and meanness all around and believes that human beings are inherently manipulative, selfish, fundamentally untrustworthy and potential enemies. To a mean spirit, the other is not to be trusted.

Trying to define right behavior is complicated. Nations have laws, codes, and regulations that need to be enforced. They are necessary for good order. When we see murder, looting, burnings, and chaos in some of our cities we know that is criminal behavior and not conducive to the common good. People have a better chance of being listened to when they protest non-violently. On the other hand, non-violent demonstrations of distress and dissent must not be dismissed, ridiculed, or ignored. When people's grievances are taken seriously, and policy changes are studied and implemented there is a better chance at improving the democratic experiment. We cannot allow for people's stuff and livelihood to be destroyed and, even more, we need to honor and protect human life. There is a reason why one of the Ten Commandments is "Thou shall not murder." The deep grief of millions of people is very tangible and needs to be attended to for the healing of the whole society. The trauma of the loss of life through criminal acts does not affect only the victims but also the perpetrators as their humanity is diminished as well. Any time we resort to violence, even to the point of taking

¹ Rom. 13:12 and 14; see also Gal. 3:27

² Mt. 4:4 and 7:24; Lk. 11:28; Jn. 7:38 and 8:31-32; ; Col. 3:16; Phil. 2:14-16; Gal. 5:1; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; James 1:21-22

³ Gal. 5:22; Rom. 8:6-10; 2 Cor. 3:17-18

⁴ Rom. 8:15a



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someone's life, we operate from negative territory: our souls are devoid of humanity and corrupted by fear and separation. When in this state, we act out of that emptiness. Dehumanized we dehumanize. Those who resort to violence do not rise to their full humanity.

For those who follow the Jewish-Christian tradition, the reference point are the Ten Commandments. In today's letter to the Romans, Paul reduces all laws to one as he points us toward something simple, easy to remember, and challenging to follow: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Rom. 13:9). That is hard to do when we find ourselves on opposite ends of a spectrum; when we do not have the same measures of justice; when we can't distinguish between real facts and creative fiction; and, ultimately, when we favor personal positioning over the common good.

The ancient biblical recommendation to "love your neighbor as yourself"⁵ begs two basic questions and a follow up corollary:

1. How much and how honestly do you love yourself? And
2. Do you see yourself in your neighbor?
 - Can you see that we share the same humanity, the same Source and also the same kind of fallacy, the same sinful rebellion to the Source of Life and Love?

When in the Spirit of Jesus, we are able to shift from the "Us-Them" dichotomy, which often under the spell of a fearful and mean spirit becomes "Us vs. Them," to the deeper and greater truth of the oneness of humanity then we can see that there is no essential difference between me and my neighbor. It is by being immersed in the truth that we are all fundamentally united in the One who made us so that we are on our way to become truly free and healed of all social division and psychological separations.

However, conflicts are part of life together. Not even the church of Jesus is spared the anguish of people being at each other's throats. That is why Jesus himself has given us guidance for times of conflict in several passages in the gospel of Matthew but especially in chapter 18.⁶ The ELCA has found Jesus' conflict management protocol so compelling that we have it engraved in our constitution. Jesus spells out the steps one by one and the process seems easy enough to follow. But how often have we truly followed it? What prevents us from showing reverence and

⁵ Leviticus 19:18 (see the church keeping that teaching in Matthew 19:19 and 22:37-39; Luke 10:27; Mark 12:28-34; John 13:14; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8).

⁶ See also Mt. 5:9.21-26.38-48 as well as 6:12 and then in today's gospel 18:15-20 and in the verses that follow 21-35. Other contributions to the subject are: Lk. 17:3; Jn. 13:34; Rom. 12:17-21; Col. 3:13; Heb. 12:15; Eph. 4:26.



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trust in the words of Jesus? Personally, I know that it is not mistrust in Jesus' words that stops me from going to the one who has offended me. It is simply that I try to avoid conflictual situations and it must be something really big for me to get all upset and in need to speak up. I know it comes easier for me to speak up on behalf of someone else. It is harder for me to advocate for myself. And I guess that is a common experience. The attempt to avoid a confrontation is still my primary response even after so many years of discipleship and training. It is not that I lack confidence. I just do not like the unpleasant feeling of a confrontation. Mostly, I am afraid of the potential disconnect and separation. I want to be loved and to belong. And that, I think, is what everybody else also aspires to.

A second reason for not wanting to face my adversary is also the unwelcome necessity of making myself vulnerable with the revelation of my upset feelings. What if I am wrong about my interpretation of the facts? What kind of consequences might I need to face? What if my feelings are not acknowledged and get dismissed as ridiculous? How embarrassing would that be? After all, it strokes my ego to hold on to my grudge and self-righteousness. Why would I give up the self-pity and the victim state that allow me to lament to a third party and receive attention and consideration? So, I fully understand that confronting people is neither as easy to do as Jesus prescribed it nor is it at first desirable. But when I am able to overcome the initial resistance and bring my grievance to someone, I have the opportunity to learn something about myself and my adversary, clear the way from lingering resentment and, potentially, strengthen the relationship with renewed trust.

There is a very fundamental reason why I think Jesus instructs his disciples to take the first step and approach the offending party. Granted that it is not always feasible nor safe to be alone with an offender to discuss wrongdoing, especially when someone's life or livelihood is on the line, Jesus' instructions aim at avoiding the destructiveness of secrets and hashed conversations when people refuse (or are unable) to speak honestly to one another about their differences. Small issues become big and big issues become catastrophic. What Jesus prescribes is direct and open communication. The challenge is maintaining a fair and honest conversation based on curiosity. If that at first doesn't happen, then a second and third attempt are suggested with more people involved for the purpose of witnessing and brokering a resolution. The call to hear one another, to listen closely to the truth of the other, is a vital component of a community grounded in the ways of Jesus.

I would like to suggest two insights upon my reading of and praying over today's gospel. One is of a pedagogical nature (the way we teach and pass on information) and has to do with self-



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understanding and spiritual growth; the other is more of a sociological nature (the way we interact with others) and aims at equipping us with tools that allow us to show up in the world differently and with presence.

In the first case, the way Jesus guides us through conflict seems to offer a long leash to our pride. His approach to life as proclaimed in the Beatitudes (“Blessed are the meek...the pure of spirit...the peacemaker...for theirs is the kingdom of God”)⁷ is in evident opposition to today’s passage from Matthew 18. In fact, Jesus seems to allow an opening to the arrogant understanding that if I am in a conflict I must automatically be in the right. In other words, he seems to affirm our defensive mechanisms that subtly convince us that *if* we have a conflict the other person *must* be at fault. Jesus does not call our arrogance out. He seems to acknowledge that that puerile stance is our starting point. We are allowed, in this teaching, to fall flat on our face and possibly see the arrogance we are operating with. We can arrive at this conclusion if we keep in mind an earlier teaching in which Jesus encourages us to make the first step in all humility when we realize that someone has a grudge against us considering us at fault for some reasons.⁸ In conflictual interactions, then, we may want to keep our pride in check and instead of rushing into judgment, we may want to ask ourselves what our part in the conflict might be. Life tends to teach us either we cooperate with reasonable responsibility or try to hold on to our wounded ego.

The second insight follows our attempt at seeking a conversation and a possible apology. If we do not write off the offender and short-circuit the process by just complaining to a third person with the scope of gaining an ally, we go to the offender, according to the text, with the arrogant assumption of being in the right. We bring our list of grievances and the reasons why we are right, and they are wrong. The energy is quite dense because we assume the other will not capitulate very easily. Our ultimate goal is of being heard, and of receiving a promise of a future behavioral change. If this does not happen, we bring in a third party. If there is no movement, we refer the case to the church. Yet, Jesus did not intend the third party and then the church to be used as an extra weight on the scale. They are supposed to intervene as non-judgmental and neutral witnesses; their role is simply to make sure that the two parties fight fairly and honestly. And here is the insight: Jesus does not talk nor does he make any promise of a resolution to the conflict; at least, that is what we do not see in the text.

⁷ Mt. 5

⁸ Mt. 5:23-23



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But we do not see a resolution in the text, I think, because we approach it with our human eyes, and our limited understanding is based on a scarcity mentality where “gain” or “victory” or “success” and so forth are products of a zero sum operation. A scarcity mentality puts us at odds with each other and we become competitors for the only acceptable outcome: our personal satisfaction and the defeat of the other.

A more attentive reading of the text will reveal to us Jesus’ insistence on listening. The verb to listen is used several times in this passage. And this is the insight: a conflict resolution is not so much the material outcome of the conversation (even though that may be taken as a collateral benefit.) But a truer resolution to a conflict is the resolution to *listen* to each other. When we get off our high horses and affirm each other’s humanity we approach the other with humility, respect, and curiosity. The witnessing presence of a third party and the whole community is to acknowledge the intention (or lack thereof) of gathering in Jesus’ name and affirm His presence (again, or lack thereof) among the disciples (v. 20). That is the power to bind and to loose in heaven and on earth and that gains us the assurance that our prayers made in *agreement* will be listened by our heavenly Father. Of course, there must be room for failure; there must be acceptance that the conversation will not produce any reconciliation. Never mind, says Jesus: start over with the gentleness and care you would use for a potential convert. And for this, prayer is needed.

The agreement on the proper prayer request can only come when the disciples are of one heart and mind, the heart and mind of Jesus, who is visibly present in the community. The resolution, in the end, is the restoration of the “community” and not the revenge for the offended.

May we be fast at checking our pride at the door when encountering those with whom we disagree. May we seek to honor and respect all human beings especially at the time of a conflictual interaction. May we center our prayer on Jesus and relinquish all attachments to a desired outcome knowing that in Him there is freedom and abundance of love. Amen.