

SERMON: "A 'COME TO JESUS' MEETING"
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT EZEKIEL 33:7-11
NEW TESTAMENT MATTHEW 18:15-20

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INTRODUCTION

I think I told you about the fella they rescued from an isolated island in the middle of the Pacific? Think Tom Hanks and his volleyball friend, Wilson.

This guy had been on that island alone for a long time. When they found him he had built three small buildings on the island.

This puzzled his rescuers. After tending to his basic needs, they asked him 'Why three buildings?' He explained. "This one is my home.

That one over there is my church. I go there to worship and pray.'

Both of these answers made sense to those asking.

But the third building, that one was still a mystery so they asked about that one

The man waved his hand and said, 'That's the church I used to go to.'

Yes, this is a sermon about conflict, conflict in general, church conflict in particular.

It can be quite painful. It can lead to folks leaving ... walking to another building or walking away and never walking in a church building again.

I don't think Jesus speaks to it here in Matthew chapter eighteen to frighten us with stories that leave scars. That is not his purpose, nor is it my purpose.

I'm more comfortable with conflict than most (maybe you've picked up on that) because I've learned conflict handled with humility, honesty and hopefulness can and does bear witness to Christ's ministry of reconciliation

This passage addresses conflict head on, even lays out a process

Presbyterian love a 'how to' focus on process. We pay attention to process.

But let's not get stuck there. I want you to see the end that Christ has in mind

And that end is reconciliation, a strengthened togetherness

To see that I want you to back up and connect these verses with the whole chapter.

They all fit together like a recipe, all about that togetherness. Richard Ward, writing for "The Working Preacher" helps us see the larger picture with his summary

First, would-be leaders in the community are to be as humble and teachable as children (Matthew 18:1-5). Next, Jesus' followers must attend to matters of personal morality so that they don't become "stumbling blocks" in the paths of others (18:6-9). Third, faithful disciples cultivate care for one another (18:10-14) in the manner that Paul writes to the Romans. "Owe no one anything," he says, "except to love one another" (13:8a). Fourth, be persistent in resolving situations involving conflict (18:15-20). Then, be prepared to offer forgiveness to one another, "seventy times seven" if necessary (18:21-35).

THE BIGGER PICTURE

All that focus on being a community of believers, on togetherness is what surrounds and supports the passage for today about how to deal with conflict. It is rather straightforward. My mentor Allen described it well. He once told me his job as the head of staff was to build community, build a team
His practice – public praise and private criticism

I've tried to follow Allen's wisdom. It's rather easy with this great staff
I hope you can easily recall me saying good things about each of them, all of them
I also and especially hope you cannot recall me publicly criticizing any of them

I'd apply that to recalling me publicly talking bad about someone else
I may question their methods, but not their motives; their position, but not the person
If you hear me doing so I ask you ... Please apply Matthew 18:15-20

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. 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. If 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.

That is what we call a "come to Jesus" meeting.
I rather like the turn of phrase. When we talk about a come to Jesus meeting, we are talking about someone we love giving it to us straight, setting us straight speaking some truth (usually an uncomfortable truth) in love

You've been to a come to Jesus meeting? It's not one of those where we think 'Oh, I have just the right outfit for that.' It's not a party. It's more coaching, teaching, correcting. I cannot help but think about my dad talking clearly, calmly looking over his glasses ... a 'You can do better' kind of talk

And the name, 'Come to Jesus.' It fits with this passage.
It is Jesus who is with us. It is Jesus' who lays out the process from step one
I hope you noticed how often the word 'listen' is used. Three times
Listening to someone, especially being able to hear some tough love, get 'coached up' is how this process works, a big step toward reconciliation.

We're going to test this process in a way, do some intentional listening
The pastors proposed and the Session approved (after a really good conversation), a two part series we are calling "Text and Context" about faith and sexuality.

We are going to do two things quite intentionally - listen to the bible passages that often come up when people talk about their views about marriage, about homosexuality, about laws banning gender affirming care, about books on school shelves, about what beer one might buy or boycott

LISTENING TO GOD & EACH OTHER

Homework with those passages and some questions for your consideration can be found in the commons. Please take one, do some bible study.

Ask questions of the bible ... and let it ask questions of you.

Listen to God's word. Do your homework. Then let's talk

Let's listen to God by listening to God's people, let's listen to each other.

Are we venturing into politics here? The answer is yes and no

Yes. These political issues are rooted in our diverse and unique views of what God is calling us to be and do, in our core beliefs, our faith.

As a follower of Jesus Christ and one of the leaders of a faith community,

I will not tell you what to believe, but I am going to ask you questions about what you believe, what the foundations of your beliefs are

and how those beliefs translate into how you love God and neighbor

My own personal belief is this. From my reading of the bible and of Jesus'

life and work in particular, I know that God holds faith leaders to high standards

(think of how Jesus criticized the Pharisees). Therefore, I am not going to leave it to politicians, pundits and pollsters to talk about 'what Christians believe.'

As I faith leader I am going to speak up. And I am going to listen

I trust you. I trust the leaders of this church. And I trust the Holy Spirit.

I think we can listen to God's word, listen to one another. And that doing so will, like any other 'come to Jesus' meeting ... do us some good.

Help us live into what it means and what it takes to be "A Place for Everyone"

Again, is this about politics? No. It is about togetherness, about family

We all have people in our families who see things differently than we do

Do we just not talk about our differences? I get we don't want to argue

But why, for heavens sake, can't we see those differences, that diversity not as a threat ... but as a gift, as an opportunity to learn and to love.

We got plenty of talking going on around us. We could use more listening, couldn't we?

Listening comes highly recommended ... by Jesus. It is mentioned here three times.

You know what else is written all over this chapter and these verses – humility

Come to Jesus meetings only work when the one doing the inviting

and the invited both practice humility, listen to each other

work toward reconciliation as the desired end.

Humble and hopeful mix. Smug and stubborn do not

Think about what Jesus said about the speck in a neighbor's eye, how to remove it

He tells us to begin with the log in our own eyes, then focus on the speck in theirs

That way both get removed. That's how a 'come to Jesus' meeting works.

SUMMARY

I am reminded again of lessons learned from my mentor.

Allen taught me that constructive criticism is constructive if ...

You focus on the practice, not the person. You make just one critique.

No good in piling on. It doesn't work.

Give a clear example. And offer a solution ... "try this instead."

Allen's practical wisdom, I am convinced, follows Jesus' wisdom

And it works with each step. First, talking one on one. Private criticism.

Oh and to state the obvious – this private criticism only works when you talk

It doesn't work when you type or text or tweet.

It also works when you ask another sibling in Christ to be part of the hopefully constructive criticism. And it works when committees and congregations are working on and toward togetherness.

Conflict happens ... but it doesn't have to be destructive

When we are humble, honest and hopeful ... It can be constructive

When we talk (and listen) to each other ... it can be constructive

Jesus goes so far as to lay out a process for the 'how to' of conflict

But he doesn't just give us a process, some instructions

He gives us incarnation. He gives us himself.

He is with us amidst our conflict

You remember how these verses end? He says ... **"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."**

You've heard that phrase before. Probably said it a time or two

Did you know it is from this context ... from how to handle conflict?

Sure seems to me like just the right place for Jesus to say such a thing.

He is with us through that conflict and toward reconciliation

That is the goal of a "Come to Jesus' meeting ... reconciliation

That is what Jesus is doing here among us ...

reconciling us to God and to one another.

Reconciliation is a beautiful thing.

Can you picture it in your mind? I have a clear picture in my mind.

My two sons are happily married. My two daughters have not yet married.

I'm hoping their future husbands are old school and ask our blessing

I have a test in mind for future sons in law. Watch "Field of Dreams"

with them. If they aren't tearing up at the end of the movie

when estranged father and son are playing catch ... well?

Playing catch isn't about winning ... It's about being together

That's what I want for my children ... and for all God's children