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Our Saviour/St. Stephen's
Pentecost 15
September 10, 2023

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, many years ago, when both my wife Kathy and I were at the time driving Dodge Neons, we decided it was time to upgrade.

It was time to invest in a minivan.

You see, at this point in our lives, we had two small children.

And when we would travel to see family or when we were going on vacation, the Dodge Neon just wasn't cutting it anymore, in terms of the space we needed.

The Dodge Neon was a great car—but not when you have a growing family.

As we probably know there is a lot of stuff you need to take with you when you travel with two small kids—like a pack-and-play and a stroller and... well you get the picture.

And so, needing a new vehicle, Kathy and I went to the Dodge dealership (right out here) along the Carlisle Pike.

And we sat down with a sales representative.

In fact, I can still remember his name, Dave Cherry.

And Dave was really great guy to work with.

In fact, he even took a cut in his commission when he sold us our minivan.

Maybe he recognized that we were a young family and needed a break.

Or maybe he wanted to be generous because he was soon going to be retiring, and wanted to do a good deed.

Who knows?

But whatever the reason, Dave gave us a really good deal on a Dodge minivan.

And I remember that when we were sitting down with Dave going over the paperwork, he says to Kathy and me, "We just have a few more items to cover."

And then he says, "There is an option with the model of your vehicle, which you might want to consider, being that you have young children."

And Kathy and I are sitting there, thinking, "He is going to tell us about some sort of entertainment package, like a video screen that folds down from the car ceiling, or something similar, right?"

And so we say, "Go on."

And Dave says, "In the second row seating, where the children sit, there is the option for the installation of a plexi-glass divider between the seats, to provide crowd control in the back."

And both my wife's eyes and mine lit up. We're thinking, "This is a great idea. Whoever came up with this is a genius."

And so we say to Dave, "They have that?"

And Dave, in the most of stoic of faces, says, "No."

Kathy and I still laugh about that exchange with Dave to this day.

"Thanks, Dave, you had our hopes up, only to be dashed a moment later."

Yes, too bad no one ever perfected the plexi-glass divider, as the travelling family's means of conflict management.

But the fact that the plexi-glass divider has not come into being surely has something to do with the fact that in the event of an accident, people don't want shards of plexi-glass flying around in the cabin of their minivan.

That would be bad.

PAUSE

Now, today, in our gospel reading, we encounter our Lord Jesus' take on conflict management.

And we might wonder whether Jesus himself actually gives us this practical guide on conflict management.

Or, whether this advice comes from the early Church, and then was projected back onto to Jesus.

For the Church did not really come into existence until some years after Jesus died and was raised, and ascended back into heaven.

Christianity was still more or less a movement at the time of Jesus, and yet here in our text, we are talking about the Church.

But whatever the origin, this teaching about how the Church should conduct itself when conflict arises is spot on.

In fact, the advice in this text is a guide for avoiding a larger conflict.

And so what does Jesus tell us in this text?

If you have a disagreement with a member of the church, go and talk it out by yourselves.

And if the member listens to you, well and good.

But if not, take then one or two others with you, and talk it out in this small group.

And, again, if the member listens, well and good.

But if not, THEN, and only then, take the matter to the wider church.

PAUSE

Do we see what Jesus does here? Jesus limits the number of persons involved in the disagreement.

Nowhere does Jesus say that if you have a disagreement with a member of the church, go behind the back of the other person and say to third party, "Did you hear what so and so said to me? Did you hear what so and so did to me? Can you believe that? Don't you think that's just awful?"

And, nowhere does Jesus say, "After telling that third party your gripe, go and tell the same thing to two or three others, or however many you can find."

No, when a disagreement arises, Jesus did not say, "Collect as many people as you can into your camp against that other person."

No, Jesus says nothing of the sort.

Instead Jesus says, “Go and talk to the person alone with whom you have a disagreement.”

Keep whatever it is that is troubling your relationship, keep whatever it is between yourselves, and only include others into the discussion when it becomes absolutely necessary.

Now, why does Jesus say this?

Why all the so-called “secrecy”?

Why not just tell others about how what someone said or did upset us?

Why not tell others about how we have been slighted by so and so?

That seems to be our go-to response. That seems to be the human being’s *modus operandi*.

Tell others, so as to get others to feel our angst as well, so that others will commiserate with us.

But, the early church knew exactly what it was doing when it put this advice into practice, for the advice is golden.

For what does this advice do?

Two things, actually. It seeks to protect the relationship and the person with whom one has a disagreement.

AND it protects the larger community as a whole.

It protects the relationship and the person with whom we are at odds, and it protects the community.

PAUSE

Now as to the first point, the apostle Paul says something similar in I Corinthians, chapter 6.

There in I Corinthians Paul is admonishing the church about some members who are taking other members to court to decide their grievances.

And Paul tells the Christians in Corinth that it is better to be wronged and to be defrauded than to take a fellow Christian to court.

For Paul says, “To have such lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you.”

In other words, even if you win your case in court, you have already lost the relationship between you and that other Christian.

And it is the same point Jesus is making in our gospel text.

If we take our grievance about someone to other people, speaking negatively about that other person behind their back, or even out in public—what they did, what they said, how they slighted us, we have already done harm, and maybe even irrevocable harm to the relationship we had with the person with whom we are in disagreement.

Martin Luther is helpful here, for he goes so far to explain the Eighth Commandment to us, such that we are to interpret our neighbor’s actions always in the best possible light, not in the worst possible light.

And so, Jesus in our gospel text tells us to go to the other when the two of you are alone and discuss the disagreement, because then you are protecting the other person’s reputation, not broadcasting their words and actions to the world.

And you are really protecting your own reputation as well, because to be spewing vitriol about another person reflects negatively on us, too.

Because that other to whom we are talking probably wonders, “Boy, what does this person say about me to others when I am not around?”

Now, we know all this. This is nothing new. But it is nonetheless a very good reminder.

So that is the first point: Go to the one with whom we have a disagreement when we are alone, so as to protect the other’s reputation, and so as to show the proper respect and care for the relationship we have with that other.

PAUSE

The second point then, is that talking to someone about a disagreement when alone protects the larger community.

How? Well, let us think about it.

What happens when instead of keeping a fault we have with another between
ourselves and that other person...

What happens when we tell others behind the other person's back what that
person had done or said?

What are we doing, but trying to persuade others to be on "our side" against that
other person.

And so what happens is that we start to move people to be in our camp.

And pretty soon you have "our camp" and you have the "other camp."

You have one side versus the other side.

And you have a big ugly division within the community.

Now, in psychology this process is called triangulation.

We form a triangle by bringing in a third party into the disagreement.

And we form one triangle, and then another triangle, and so on and so forth.

And pretty soon different camps, different sides have formed within the
community.

And so, it behooves...it behooves us in the community to recognize when we are
being approached by someone in the community and are being asked in a subtle
or maybe not so subtle way to take a side.

In such an instance, we need to say, "You know I really don't want to get involved
in this disagreement."

And even say to the other person who is trying to triangulate us, "You know, I
would encourage you to talk directly to so and so, with whom you have this
disagreement."

This is how we de- or un-triangulate ourselves.

This is how we stay impartial.

This is how we keep a disagreement from escalating into a full-blown crisis within
a community, by not taking sides.

PAUSE

Now, again, maybe we know all this already, and so we are sitting there thinking, "Been there, done that, got the t-shirt."

Or, maybe we are sitting there thinking this hits a little too close to home.

And I recognize that each us is at a different point in the Christian journey of healing.

But in truth, we can't NOT talk about this, when it appears so blatantly in our face today in our gospel lesson.

Short of having plexi-glass dividers always erected between ourselves and others to keep us at bay from one another, like kids in a minivan...

Short of plexi-glass barriers, we have this gospel text to help us with conflict management.

And this practical advice from our Lord is helpful not just in navigating our way in the church community, but it is helpful in navigating our way in whatever community we find ourselves: whether it be our family, or our work environment, or our friend groups, or the organizations of which we are part, or the neighborhood in which we live.

Yes, this is good practical advice from our Lord, for protecting the reputation of the other person and for protecting that relationship with whom we might have a disagreement, and it is good advice for protecting the community in which we participate.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.