

*The Trouble With Barky, The Trouble With Me...*

Are your relationships important to you?  
What happens when conflict comes into your relations?

Last week, Bob and the sermon message centered around the call of Jesus to “deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me”.

This week we run smack into what is probably the simplest, most difficult, and most common task we have to do. Pick up your cross, people. Here is a part of it:

Tell the truth to each other in ways that are honest, loving, and healing.

Here's the usual scenario:

*John is upset because his neighbor's Rose's dog "Barky" is left out at night and is barking. So, wishing to both share his frustration and to avoid a "scene" with his neighbor, John tells Rob and Cindy, who live across the street. Cindy, in trying to helpful, mentions to Rose in casual conversation that "some of the neighbors" are complaining about Barky. Now Rose is upset because "all her neighbors are talking about her behind her back." Rose suspects it was probably John who said something, either that or Annie two doors down on the opposite side of the street. One thing leads to another, and by the weekend, nobody is talking to anyone else on "Placid Lane."*

This happens everywhere --- on your street, in Little League, on the Board of the PTA, on the job, and all kinds of places, and in all our extended families.

We are very practiced in unhealthy ways of communicating – perhaps because there are so many of them.

One: **We triangulate.** That is, we bring our concern, but not directly to the person who it involves the most. It's the most famous, or infamous, old “people are saying” line...Usually we had a dollop of whipped cream on top and say, “Now *I* don't believe this, but “people are saying...” We'd never call it gossip, but we're just sharing “what we've heard about things...”

**We ascribe motives:** Another unhealthy way of communicating is to ascribe unsavory motives where there may not be any. “Rose just doesn’t care if she keeps us up all night with that darn dog. What does she care – she’s practically deaf anyway. It doesn’t bother *her*...”

**We Don’t Want to Cause Any Trouble:** Another classic way of dealing with conflict is to simply not say anything at all. “Oh, I don’t really want to start anything, or make trouble.” Well, after a couple dozen nights of keeping awake with Barky all night, what do you think will happen to John’s relationship with Rose, his neighbor? He’ll avoid her more and more, he certainly will think twice about dropping by just to chat, and, over time, John’s heart will harden to the point that “we don’t really care about her.” And eventually, he’ll just sort of drift away, socially if not literally...

Oh yes, this happens in faith communities. It happens in churches, maybe even more so because we have the idea that conflict isn’t “nice”, and good Christian people shouldn’t have conflict. After all, if we are one in the Spirit, there should be no disagreements amongst us, right?

Well, one of the very first things we do in Vestry orientation is to talk about the fact that conflict itself is neither good nor bad. It simply IS. It is normal. It is to be expected. And we can deal with it in *healthy* way that help us as individuals grow and learn and change in *positive, holy, and life-giving* ways. Or we can deal with it in *unhealthy* ways; ways that keep us as individuals repeating the same worn out frustrating patters in life, that divide us from one another, and ways that tear apart and undermine the unity of the Body of Christ and sap the vital strength out of the life of any church community.

Jesus in today’s Gospel presents us with a healthy way of surfacing and dealing with disagreement and conflict in our lives but *especially* in a faith community. Because he calls us all to be One in him, as he and the Father are one, and he knows that we cannot do this without God’s Spirit and Grace.

To set the scene very briefly... In the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has been talking to his disciples, and in the passage just before this, they have been discussing who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

(Incidentally, Jesus answers them by referencing a child. <sup>4</sup>***Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*** <sup>5</sup>***Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.***” (Matthew 18:4-5)

And Jesus says about conflict:

***15 'If another member of the church (in the original Greek "your brother") sins against you,\* go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.***

Now, let me state an aside on this: Jesus is talking here to his disciples, about a "brother" or member of the church who they feel has done them wrong. That is, the scenario assumes a certain equality or balance of power between the two. WE may be faced with a situation where there is a significant power difference between the one who feels wronged and the one they feel has wronged them. They may, rightly, be frightened about the repercussions of speaking to such a person who holds such power. Or the one who believes that they have been wronged may simply feel they don't have the courage, strength, or verbal skills to explain their injury very well. In that case, we can move along to step two, which has the effect of providing some extra support and leveling any unequal playing field as much as it can.

***<sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church... (Matthew 18:16-17)***

Now, this has a couple important points or purposes to it. Although we may honestly feel and believe that we have been sinned against or wronged, it may be that there is information, circumstances, or facts out there, that we are simply not aware of. The presence of a larger community is not simply to be witnesses or advocates against the other person, but also brings with it a wider perspective that would help us understand *why* the person has acted in the way they have. And of course, to provide accountability where it is genuinely needed.

Jesus continues: ***"if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.*** (Matthew 18:17)

There is a certain delicious amount of dramatic irony in this statement, as Matthew records it in his telling of the Gospel. The proper religious culture of the time of Jesus, of course, would have kept their distance from both Gentiles and the socially-reviled tax-collectors... And there *are* times and extreme circumstances, that for the well-being or safety of individuals or a community, such distance must be kept.

But we must remember it is these very people whom Jesus ministered to, and even drew into his closest circle. Just a few chapters ago, Matthew has told us of the story of Jesus ministering to the Canaanite women, and outsider and a Gentile. And of

course, how can we, the reader, fail to notice that this story is being recounted by Matthew, of all people, himself called to be one Jesus' closest disciples from his former life as... you guessed it! ... a tax collector. (Matthew 9:9)

<sup>18</sup> *“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”* <sup>19</sup> *Again, 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.* <sup>20</sup> *For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”* (Matthew 18:18-20)

About these verses, let me leave you with a thought that comes from The Rev. Todd Weir, on the web blog “Bloomingcactus”<sup>1</sup>:

*“The second half of the Gospel lesson testifies to the power of a group of believers who can find unity work with common purpose. If two people can agree and pray to God for help, it will be done for them, Jesus says. Sometimes that’s all it takes even in a large church. A small group of people who have a unity in Christ can bring a whole church together or tear it apart, depending on their spirit. If we really practice the idea that wherever two or three people are gathered in Christ’s name he is present to us, then we have the power to create true community, true compassion and true unity, and whatever is done in heaven will be done on earth.”*

OH – and a final report of my neighbor, me, and “Barky.” In real life, there is no “John” or “Rose”, and we don’t live on “Placid Lane”. But there is me, and Jeanine, my new next-door neighbor. Who has a dog. Which she used to leave out in her yard at night... After about the second night after she and Barky moved in, I went and spoke to her directly... just a day before she was planning to come and speak to me. She works at night, which I didn’t know, and leaves her dog out in the yard, so he doesn’t chew everything in the house up. I, however, work during the day, and I leave my new puppy out in the yard when I go to work, so she can run and not chew everything in my house all up. And so neither of us has to kennel our dogs all day. Yup – you guessed it... while I’m away, **my dog** Monique barks all day and keeps my neighbor Jeanine awake when she is trying to get some rest.

I think the future is going to hold some serious two-doggy play dates, in either yard.

Peace, and a good night’s (or day’s) sleep to us all.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://bloomingcactus.typepad.com/bloomingcactus/2005/11/matthew\\_181520\\_.html](http://bloomingcactus.typepad.com/bloomingcactus/2005/11/matthew_181520_.html). Accessed 9-02-09.

## **Matthew 18:15-20 (New International Version)**

### **A Brother Who Sins Against You**

15 "If your brother sins against you,<sup>[a]</sup> go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'<sup>[b]</sup> 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

18 "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be<sup>[c]</sup> bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be<sup>[d]</sup> loosed in heaven.

19 "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."