

Pentecost XVII  
Proper 18a  
Mt 18.15-20; Rm 12.9-21  
September 7, 2008

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It may come as quite a shock and surprise... but there was dissension in the early church!

Jesus, of course, was in conflict with the religious authorities of his day... even unto the point of death.

In the first century of Christianity, there were disagreements about the place of Gentile converts... so much so that St. Paul wrote in his epistle to the Galatians, *Then I rebuked Peter openly to his face, for he was clearly wrong.*

There were arguments about the human and divine natures of Jesus in the second and third centuries...

In the 10th and 11th centuries there were disputes concerning authority, which eventually led to schism.

During the Scholastic age, there was great tumult over the sacraments.

The very essence of the church was at the heart of the 16th Century Reformation debate.

The Enlightenment of the 18th Century brought skepticism concerning the Holy Trinity.

In the 20th Century, human nature was gussied up just a bit, prompting Dr. Menninger to write his famous book *Whatever Became of Sin?*

And as for the short time we have had in the 21st Century? ...Why, we've tried to reprise the whole list!

And so it should not startle us that Jesus, in his earthly ministry, gave rather explicit instructions on how to be reconciled when Christians are at enmity.

First, there is to be no triangulation. More churches have been wrecked by sideways conversations, parking lot vestry meetings, and gossipy telephone calls. If there were only one lesson we could take from Bishop Salmon's episcopate it would be that we must always be frank and honest in dealing directly with disagreements... And that of course, is a Gospel precept... If your brother sins against you, tell him his fault between you and him alone

If that effort fails, then and only then is the dispute to be given a larger hearing.

Now, before I go further, we need to remember a few things about this passage. This chapter of Matthew's Gospel begins with the disciples asking Jesus, Lord, who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?

Wouldn't you like to have seen the expression on Jesus' face when such a question was put to him? His entire life and ministry were built on humility and sacrifice. And yet, his followers continued to clamor for power and privilege.

All of the examples and illustrations in Chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel serve to remind us that humility is the basis for all Christian fellowship.

Which brings us to the question: When we feel that we have a grievance against a fellow Christian, what is the motive behind our grievance?

As Americans, we have learned to place a great deal of value on individual rights. And that is a good thing, of course. Rugged American individualism was born on the frontier, and fueled much of the success of our country.

But other cultures, often through the experience of common misery and suffering, have learned to value the collective good.... (which is also a good thing).

It is keeping those two ideals in balance that is important.

When we find ourselves very agitated over some matter of worship or doctrine...or the hour appointed for Divine Worship... or the color of the parish hall... we indeed need to take it to the Church... But often the first sentence of our criticism needs to be Bless me Father, for I have sinned.

Far too often, our criticism comes from our own needs for vindication. But what would happen if being right... having our way... was superseded by asking instead, What is best for the whole Body?

That is the spirit in which this tool for reconciliation is intended. It is not a bludgeon by which we can whip a slipshod church into shape. Rather, our Lord is asking us, as he always does, to first look deeply into our own hearts. And if we find there that we are truly motivated by genuine love, then the words we speak will find their mark. And lives will be changed. And blessings will follow.

When I was a young member of this parish, I used to listen with great fondness as Fr. Fleming and Mr. Charlie Stevens used to say the preparation before mass in the sacristy. As we waited in Starr Chapel, it was very easy to hear that big voice rumble through the corridor.

But we have changed that old tradition just a bit. Rather than saying the preparation in the sacristy before the daily masses, we have begun saying it in the presence of the congregation, chiefly because I think it is very important for the congregation to see and hear the celebrant strike his breast and confess his unworthiness to handle holy things.

None of us presumes to trust in our own righteousness.

That is the first and most important place to begin.

And when we begin there, our love will be genuine, we will hate what is evil, and we will hold fast to what is good.

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Amen