

Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus among us

Jesus present in our thinking, words, actions, and listening

The story is told that a man's daughter had asked the local pastor to come and pray with her father. When the pastor arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed. The pastor assumed that the old fellow had been informed of his visit.

"I guess you were expecting me," he said.

"No, who are you?"

"I'm the new associate at your local church," the pastor replied. "When I saw the empty chair, I figured you knew I was going to show up."

"Oh yeah, the chair," said the bedridden man. "Would you mind closing the door?" Puzzled, the pastor shut the door.

"I've never told anyone this, not even my daughter," said the man. "But all of my life I have never known how to pray. At church I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it always went right over my head."

"I abandoned any attempt at prayer," the old man continued, "until one day about four years ago my best friend said to me, 'Joe, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here's what I suggest. Sit down on a chair; place an empty chair in front of you, and in faith see Jesus on the chair. It's not spooky because Jesus promised, 'I'll be with you always.' Then just speak to him and listen in the same way you're doing with me right now."

"So, I tried it and I've liked it so much that I do it a couple of hours every day. I'm careful, though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to the funny farm."

The pastor was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the old guy to continue on the journey. Then he prayed with him, and returned to the church.

Two nights later the daughter called to tell the pastor that her daddy had died that afternoon. "Did he seem to die in peace?" the pastor asked.

"Yes, when I left the house around two o'clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me one of his corny jokes, and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange, in fact, beyond

strange — kinda weird. Apparently, just before Daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on a chair beside the bed."¹

This story is not a new one and though I do not know the author I am grateful for the image of Jesus sitting with us. As I pondered our scripture from Matthew the verse that stayed with me was, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (v20). It made me wonder, "What does that mean for Christian community?"

What would it mean for you to think of Jesus sitting in the pew beside you today? If he knew your thoughts right now, how would that change your thinking? When you look across the church can you see Jesus as a friend to every person here?

If, when you walked outside and there was a homeless person asking you for money, could you see Jesus standing there with you and the other person?

There is a mantra that is so popular bracelets have created and marketed with the words "What would Jesus do?" But what if we went further and thought, What would Jesus think? What would Jesus hear? If Jesus went with us throughout our day, was listening on the phone, sitting in on conversations over coffee, at the office, in the classroom, in the yard or garden, at painting class, in the garage, at book studies, at the hospital or clinic, over quilting, and particularly in your kitchen, how would that change what you say, how you say it, and the intent behind it?

There can be a lot of comfort in knowing that Jesus is near, but if you want to only be a Christian on Sunday morning in the pews and leave Jesus behind the moment you leave the Sanctuary, then the thought that Jesus is among us might be pretty unnerving.

It is in this context of this verse that ones preceding it might be understood. Depending on your take, these verses could be seen as ones that help to enforce rules or demonstrate how to be in relationship with others. Looking back at church history it might appear that rules rather than relationship have been the focus.

Still, it could be that the church was also too legalistic. It happened in Jesus time and people have a habit of being that way when it comes to conflict. Easier to have a formula and tick the boxes as you move through the steps then think beyond to the people or person and their needs and struggles.

If you have a problem or conflict with another, the steps we are to take as spoken by Jesus and recorded by Matthew go like this...

Go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.

If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

¹ Source unknown. Please advise if you know the original author.

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 the member 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.

Sounds like a pretty straightforward conflict resolution formula. And if none of it works, well then, the ones who wronged us are the bad guys.

Yet it was not as a rule maker that Jesus came to be among us. If nothing else he was busy breaking rules, questioning the long-held traditions, and experiences of the Jewish people of the time. For Jesus, it was relationships that mattered. How we treat each other, and always, how those most marginalized in society would be affected.

This formula about how to handle conflict was given not so that we could be legalistic about handling conflicts but so that we would see the need to restore relationships. It is much harder to face someone who has wronged you and talk about the matter in love than it is to talk behind another's back, gossip, and feel good because others are siding with you.

It might surprise you to know that as a minister it is one of the biggest struggles I face. People talking around me, in private conversations, rarely coming to me with their thoughts about how worship was conducted, which hymns I choose, why do I wear vestments one Sunday and not another, or any other multitude of opinions. It is my greatest hope that people would trust me enough to come and speak to me about their experience of me and our church. My greatest learning has come when people have spoken to me, in love, and concern, but also when frustrated.

In most conflicts, and in relationships in general, we are very good at making assumptions about why people behave and act as they do in situations, but rarely do we have the insight to understand the reasons people act and speak as they do.

But when we choose to work to restore relationships we are also taking the chance of being made aware of our own wrongdoing, and that can be a very humbling experience.

The follow-up to the checklist of how to resolve conflict seems rather straight forward as well. "Such a one who refuses to listen even to the church should be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (17c).

That seems to indicate that we are to shun them, not have anything to do with them, but I would caution you to remember that the disciple Matthew had been a tax collector. Jesus knew that Matthew had been a tax collector, forgave him, loved him, and Matthew became one of the strongest leaders of the church. This is not about excommunication is about restoration.

The church, and we as individuals, have the ability to bind people in our lives and in society in ways that bring injustice, pain, and harm. We also have the ability to loose those bindings, so that people are healed, restored to community, and valued.

But I want to bring you back to our story about the empty chair. Think about Jesus sitting in on your life, sitting in on the activities of our church. Maybe as a reminder that Jesus is among us and with us until the end of the age, we should make a habit of placing an empty chair in our midst...around the table at meetings and at coffee hours, so that we remember that where two or three are gathered in my name, Jesus is there among them.

My prayer is that you may know Jesus Christ with you in each moment of everyday, not in fear...because Jesus died for our sins and God loves us more that we could ever fathom...but so that we might live out our lives more aligned to the hope of Jesus for ourselves and for others. So that rules become guides to help us in bringing about beautiful and life-giving community and restored relationship. Jesus *is* God with us. Amen.