

September 6, 2020

Reflection on Matthew 18: 15-20

(Jeff reading UCC manual)

Carol: That's an interesting selection for summer reading!

Jeff: It's an old copy of the Manual of The United Church of Canada. The Manual contains policies, procedures and guidelines for how faith communities should be organized and make decisions and resolve differences.

Carol: Oh, sort of like this week's reading from the Bible.

Jeff: (quizzically) I don't think so.

Carol: You don't??!!

Jeff: No...in the Matthew passage Jesus is telling members of the church what to do if another member sins against...them...oh...

Carol: Jesus tells them they should talk to the other person, and if they won't listen, they should take a couple of other people with them to talk to the person, and if the other person still won't listen, they should let the entire church community know...

Jeff: I guess it is a kind of conflict resolution procedure!

Carol: It looks like it. Although lots of Bible scholars point out that there wasn't a community called the 'church' at that time – there was just Jesus and his few disciples wandering from village to village.

Jeff: That's right. But Matthew's gospel wasn't written until 40 or 50 years after Jesus' resurrection, by which time there were 'church' communities.

Carol: So the writer of Matthew wanted to draw on Jesus' teachings to provide a kind of 'Manual' for the early church.

Jeff: Maybe so, but it's got some pretty harsh sounding procedures.

Carol: Like what?

Jeff: Well, it says that if the offending person won't listen to the church, the church community should treat that person like a Gentile or a tax collector – that sounds like they should avoid them.

Carol: I suppose the question for us is, "How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors?"

Jeff: Hmmm...

Carol: Some of Jesus' critics accused him of eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus shared lunches with the people that others found 'undesirable.' Jesus didn't think anyone was undesirable to God.

Jeff: So, the purpose of talking to the one with whom we are in conflict is...what? To make them become our friend?

Carol: Maybe the main purpose is to keep our hearts open. Maybe it is to keep us aware that we share a humanity; that everyone is created in the image of God, is a 'child' of God.

Jeff: If so, then the passage is just as relevant today as when it was written. We certainly need to keep our hearts open to others. Racism...stigmatizing groups because of COVID outbreaks...political tweets that promote fear and distrust of anyone who doesn't support a particular leader or policies...we still seem very accomplished at 'sinning against each other', at creating divisions.

Carol: Manuals and policies are important, but deeper than all those is an openness to God's love, God's grace, God's peace amongst us, between us, within each of us.

Jeff: Trying to heal conflicted relations, trying to reconcile opposing personalities is not easy, and may not always happen, but we can't close our hearts to the Christ that lives in each of us. We can't close our love to the love of God nestled in each of us.

Carol: Jesus shared meals with the poor, the strangers, the people whom no one else wanted to share a meal with. Jesus healed those whom others excluded from their communities. Jesus welcomed those whom others walked away from. How did Jesus treat the sinners and the tax-collectors? With God's love.

Jeff: So how should we treat others?

Carol: With God's love.

Jeff: With the love of God that created us, created us to embody and express God's amazing grace and love.

Carol: Thanks be to God!

Jeff: AMEN

Carol: and AMEN!