

Bound with Love Matthew 18:15-20

Conflict is a part of marriage life

A wedding is one of the most exciting and beautiful moments in our lives. In a wedding, a couple makes a sacred covenant before God that they will live together in love as husband and wife. As a pastor, I have had several opportunities to officiate weddings. During my visit to Korea this year, I officiated a wedding for a couple who were young adult members of my church in Boston. They planned a small wedding and designed their wedding ceremony with the help of a wedding planner. Knowing that a pastor would share a message at wedding, the wedding planner was concerned that the length of the wedding ceremony would be longer than planned. I know that pastors tend to talk too much! The couple told me that I had 10 minutes to do a sermon, the blessing of the marriage and the declaration of marriage. From experience, I knew that the bride and groom rarely remember what they heard at the wedding, so I did as I was asked. No matter what message I share at weddings, I generally end the sermon with one bit of practical advice about marriage life. That is ““be ready to fight and fight in a healthy way!” You know what I mean. Right? Many couples don’t remember what I said at their wedding about the love of God or the meaning of Christian marriage, but they remember this last advice. One couple actually told that this advice really helped them a lot to get through the first year of their marriage. Conflict is a part of marriage. No matter how much you love your partner, marital conflict is inevitable because you are different from one another and we are inherently imperfect and prone to errors and mistakes that can hurt others. Love does not automatically keep you from all conflicts.

Conflict is a part of church life

This is the same for the church life. If not all, most churches have experienced a church fight at some point in their history. I have heard that Asbury also had some tough times in the past. In fact, the United Methodist Church has been divided after a long and ugly fight. The church is not free from conflict. In fact, the church can fight over many things. Thom S. Rainer, a Christian writer, took a Twitter survey and a lot of church members and leaders shared about fights and conflicts in their congregations. Among them, he points out “twenty five silly things church members fight over.” This means these are actual disputes and conflicts some churches have had. I will not go over everything but will share a few. One church fought over “the appropriate length of the worship pastor’s beard.” Another church disputes over whether the church should allow people to wear black t-shirts, since black is the color of the devil. In another church, congregation members disagreed over using the term ‘potluck’ instead of ‘pot blessing!’ One church had a big argument over the discovery that the church budget was off...!! \$0.10. Someone finally gave a dime to settle the issue.¹ Yes, churches can fight over anything because we are imperfect and different from one another even after we are bound as one body of Christ. Having different opinions, some internal discordance in the church is perfectly o.k. What matters is how we use the experience of conflict as a means of spiritual growth and development. Otherwise, the church will spiral down to unnecessary conflicts and never carry out the mission of the church.

A way of conflict resolution?

In today’s text, Jesus offered us wisdom for conflict resolution within the church. Step one: if your brother or sister sins against you, you privately take your grievance to that person. If you feel heard, well and good! If not, go to the step two. Take a couple of people with you that both of you can trust. If you are heard then, all is well and good. If not, go to the step three. Take the matter before the church. If the offender still doesn’t listen, then, tragically, a bond is broken and the offender must be treated as “a gentile and a tax collector, an outsider” Maybe this is an ideal model of conflict resolution and reconciliation in the church.

Of course, this rule of conflict resolution and reconciliation is not fool-proof. Some divisive issues today are difficult to resolve. The issue of human sexuality is a good example. During the last New England Annual Conference, several churches chose to disaffiliate from the UMC because of their disagreement on the issue of ordaining LGBTQI clergy. While they read their resolutions for their disaffiliation, some of them said

¹ <https://churchanswers.com/blog/twenty-five-silly-things-church-members-fight-over/>

homosexual behavior is a sin. During response time, one of the LGBTQI clergy members stood up and said, "What is sin for you was salvation for me." There is a huge gap between them. Both sides insist that their positions reflect the biblical values and the teaching of Jesus Christ. In fact, we cannot tell which side is the true church in many discussions. The model of reconciliation doesn't work for many divisive issues we have today.

Treat them as a gentile and a tax collector

If our best effort for reconciliation fails and the offense refuses to be reconciled, Jesus said that we need to treat them as a gentile and a tax collector. Does this mean that excommunication is a final conflict resolution? Maybe not. A lot of churches today don't have enough members to excommunicate!

When our reconciliation effort does not work out, we need to treat them as a gentile and a tax collector. How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? He preached to them. He invited them. He sat at the same table and shared a meal with them. He became a good friend to them. So, when Jesus says to treat them like a gentile and a tax collector, he wasn't saying to turn your back on them. He was telling us to change our approach to them. The bond between us may be broken but there is still a strong bond remaining. It's not ours, but God's. All human beings are ultimately bound with the love of God and thus, we should never give up on the journey of reconciliation.

In July, I participated in the Korean Peace March in Washington D.C. It was about 102 degrees out, so it was very hot. However, more than 300 people joined the march and shouted for Korean peace. What deeply touched me was that many Chinese Christians traveled from New York to join this peace march. As you know, the Chinese and South Koreans were enemies during the Korean War, but now former enemies were bound by the love of Christ and worked together for peace and reconciliation in Korean peninsula. I know there is still a long road ahead, but I could foretaste the joy of reconciliation of the two Koreas. The bond of love we share in Christ is stronger than any other boundaries that divide us. So don't give up this work for reconciliation.

If you don't agree with the issue of ordaining LGBTQI clergy, love others who hold different opinions on this issue. If you support ordination of LGBTQI clergy, love others who hold different opinions. If you don't agree with conservative evangelical Christians about political issues, love them as God's children. If you don't agree with liberal Christians about theological issues, love them as God's children. If you don't agree with your pastor about some issues, try to love him and then everything will be fine! We are bound with love in Christ and that is an unbreakable and life-giving bond. Love is the key for Christian unity despite our differences. John Wesley said, "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences."

My beloved Asbury family. Christ had bound us with his love and made us one family. Conflict is a part of church life. But our bond of love is stronger than any other boundaries that separate us from one another. May we be bound with love. Amen.