

## **Homily – Where Two or Three Are Gathered**

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Maybe you have had this experience too, but as I age, and hopefully gain some wisdom and life experience, my interpretation of a Bible passage can change. This is true for today's Gospel lesson.

Twenty-five years ago, and certainly thirty years ago, I was afraid of this passage. I was afraid that this passage was an instruction manual on how to boot me, as a gay man, from the evangelical church. I was afraid that if I didn't believe in the right way or have the proper dogma then the church police would find out, approach me – first alone, then as a trio. Then my beliefs or behaviors would be shared with the whole church, and then I would be shunned. For me this was a terrifying possibility, which meant I hid.

Here in California we are well aware of the problems of individualism and materialism, but the grass is not greener on the other side. Communal societies also have issues. If your beliefs and behaviors fit outside the norms of a communal society, like some of those communal societies found in other parts of the world, then you might be shunned and kicked out of the community. The prospect of being booted out has a chilling and profound effect on beliefs and behaviors of the members of a community. Diversity is often stifled. It takes either a very brave or a very foolish person to risk being shunned by a communal society. So can you see why today's Gospel passage might cause me to fear? Have you ever had the fear that you might be booted from a community that has become important to you?

Today's reading from the Gospel according to Matthew was probably written in the latter part of the first century. It is a time when some of the most prominent Apostles of Jesus had already died. According to our tradition, Peter and Paul died in Rome in the 60s and James died in Jerusalem in the 60s. Today's Gospel was written about 10-20 years after the death of these apostles – a time when the communities and societies of the early church were trying to figure out how to continue on without those who had walked and talked directly with the living Jesus. One might think that the Apostles of Jesus had created communities that were homogeneous and thought about things in the same way. However, the Book of Acts and several of the New Testament Epistles show that almost from the moment Jesus ascended into heaven, the early followers of Christ splintered into various groups and factions.

In his book, "The Churches the Apostles Left Behind", Biblical scholar and Roman Catholic priest, Raymond Brown, details seven distinct communities that were formed in the first century – three unique types of communities by Paul, one by Peter, two by John and one by Matthew. And these are just the communities that were strong enough to get their books and letters in the New Testament. Others like the followers of Thomas, butted heads enough with the followers and beliefs of John, that the Gospel of Thomas is not included in our Bible. Whether it was the on-going guidance of the Holy Spirit, or power plays made by various groups, only some

early communities of Jesus became part of accepted Christian belief and others went into history's trash pile.

Over and over again, in the New Testament we have letters written to the various early Christian communities that keep warning about false teachers. We don't have many details about the activities of the false teachers, but we can guess that some of them were the debates and conflict that were happening between the various factions of the early church. How much were followers of Christ supposed to stay part of the Temple and synagogues of Jewish tradition?

Could non-Jews become followers of Christ, and how much should the Gentiles be embraced? How much did one need to adhere to the Laws of the Jewish tradition? What is the nature of Jesus, and is he coming again?

The early church was figuring stuff out, and some in the early church would have embraced the conflict between factions and some would have been scared by it.

As I was preparing for this homily, I read another homily on the same topic. The Rev. John Fitzgerald had a model in a homily that I find intriguing. We have diversity in so many areas, why shouldn't we also have diversity in the ways that we deal with conflict? And the model divides people into turtles, sharks, teddy bears, foxes, and owls. Can you tell that this last one is going to be the wise one?

First, "some people are turtles. Turtles hide from conflict by withdrawing into their shells and you can't get them out until the conflict is over. Sergeant Shultz from the old television show, Hogan's Heroes would say, "I see nothing, I know nothing." Some people are turtles. Some people are sharks. Sharks look for conflict. Sharks try to overpower their opponents in order to win in the midst of conflict. Do you know anyone like that at your work place or in your family?

The opposite of sharks are Teddy Bears. Teddy Bears want to hug and say, "Why can't we all just get along."

And, some people are foxes. Foxes try to outsmart a situation in order to get the best possible solution for themselves.

Finally, some people are owls. Owls are wise. They do not try to overpower conflict, nor do they try to avoid conflict. Rather, owls want to work through conflict to achieve a win-win resolution."

Turtles, sharks, teddy bears, foxes, and owls: these animals are in your families, they are in your workplace, and I suspect that you will find them in our church. Because when we come to church, we often bring with us patterns for dealing with conflict that we have developed over our lifetimes."

While all of these critters would not have been familiar to those in the early church, they would still have fit the model. They would have had a variety of behaviors about conflict. And, these debates that I mentioned earlier, meant that conflict resolution was needed with and between the various communities of Christ. In his Gospel, Matthew writes that Jesus showed us how to resolve conflict in a way that depends on love rather than on authority.

We all know that complaining to a third person or to a person in authority is not the loving way to address conflict. Two people must talk directly.

We know that conflict can often result from self-interest and the baggage we bring into a situation. Including others can help bring perspective and can help lower misunderstandings. We know that violence is to be avoided and it can be best to make space for tempers to calm. Over and over again in the Gospels we see that Jesus reached out to and loved Gentiles and tax collectors. This should color our understanding when Jesus says, “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Jesus is telling us that even after conflict seems unresolved, we are to continue to reach out in love. We know these things, but they are not always easy to do. Now, I shared these words about conflict because they are relevant here in our community of St. Barnabas. After being here eleven years, I don’t see much unhealthy conflict. There is a modest amount, but in fact most of the conflict that I see is the healthy kind. Our community here at St. Barnabas has a deep spirituality that is based on prayer and service, and that leads to mostly healthy interpersonal relationships and group dynamics. So, I am not sharing these words because I perceive a problem here. Instead, I am sharing these words because the healthy time is exactly the right time to re-enforce healthy behavior. Eating a healthy diet makes sense after a heart attack or illness, but it makes even more sense to eat a healthy diet when you are still healthy.

Our community at St. Barnabas is not one that has much unhealthy conflict about theology and beliefs. We think of ourselves as a big tent that encompasses people in all parts of their spiritual journey. We have healthy debate in our Vestry, in our St. Barnabas Thrift Shop, and even amongst our clergy and lay preachers. Have you ever noticed that you can hear very different views about a topic from the various preachers and speakers that we have here at St. Barnabas? A diversity of voices is a blessing and not a curse. Last week with the Bishop’s visit, we welcomed new seven people into our community. This means we welcomed in even more voices into our community. We are blessed by their arrival, and hopefully we can be a blessing for them as well.

One last point before we conclude, and this is part of the life learning that I have had about today’s Gospel passage. Sometimes our community does need to ask someone to leave. We don’t do it for the reasons I used to fear. We do not and will not shun or exclude a person for bringing in different beliefs or behaviors. You can be yourself in our community. However, sometimes we have public safety issues that cannot be resolved. Even after the person is approached directly, the activity does not stop. And, even after several attempts by multiple people, sometimes a person becomes belligerent when repeatedly asked to cease an unsafe activity. This has not happened here at St. Barnabas, but I have seen it happen elsewhere. And when it happens this is a moment to be sad and take a collective breath and sigh. However, I

hope you agree with me that we want to have a safe community here at St. Barnabas. We know we can disagree on things and still be loving and safe. We want to welcome anyone in no matter where they are in their spiritual journey, but we also want safety.

As we look around this room today, we can see a loving, safe community of many different types of people that choose to be on a life journey together. We choose to center that journey on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and on a God that never ceases to love us. We are very blessed.