

## **“Conflict Resolution”**

**Text: Matthew 18:15-20**

Prayer: Dear God, give us the tenacity to listen, to have an open mind and an open heart as we ponder these difficult words from Matthew. Amen.

A familiar scenario at a church meeting immersed me into full reflection of our gospel reading today. Pastor John surveyed the sanctuary with great pride as he stood before a shiny lectern and opened the church’s first business meeting in the newly renovated building of First Community Church.

*“I think our first item of business should be the discussion of brass nameplates for the new windows,”* said George.

*“I agree!”* Bob jumped to his feet. *“I would like my name on the large one in front, -the one with Jesus cuddling a sheep as The Good Shepherd.”*

*“No!”* shouted Martha with an angry voice, *“That window is mine! I was chair of the stained-glass window committee, and I think I should have the first choice!”*

*“That’s ridiculous!”* Tim shouted. He stood, waving his arms for attention. *“Nobody has given as much as I have for this restoration. And besides, my great-great grandfather was one of the original founders of this church! I want his name under that window!”*

*“Please—please!”* begged Pastor John. *“Don’t let your anger stand out in this meeting! This is not the way to decide the issue! Anyway, I assumed that the names of all the church’s pastors would be placed under that window!”*

*“I will not stand for this!”* Ingrid stepped heavily on Bill’s toes as she struggled out of a pew and positioned herself directly in front of Pastor John. *“I give more money to this church than Tim, and if anybody gets a name under that window it will...”*

She was interrupted by a loud tearing noise as the top of the large, metal cross separated from the wall. The church members watched in horror as the top of the cross fell, swinging down to crash loudly into the massive stained-glass window. The window shattered completely as small pieces of coloured glass flew through the air, causing Pastor John and Ingrid to fall on the floor, scrambling under a front pew for cover. From the safety of their refuge, they stared at

the upside-down cross which dangled in the empty space of the window that was once filled by the image of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

On a Sunday such as this, when we begin a new season in our church life, the words of Jesus come to us through one of the difficult teachings of Matthew and his community, instructing us what to do when someone wronged or offended us. This Matthean passage was originally written for the new followers of Jesus Christ, around 85-95 CE, who took their corporate life very seriously and were struggling to stay alive in the midst of hostile and oppressive surroundings. The more I ponder on this text, the more I see two big words that jump at me: **conflict resolution**.

What comes to mind when you hear the word "conflict?" A deep-seated anger? Unresolved disagreements? The ongoing debates in Parliament? Past and ongoing wars? A memory of a toxic event or an offensive word spoken to you? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines conflict as a "clash between hostile or opposing elements, persons, ideas, or forces." It is used as both a noun and a verb. Conflicts contain disagreements, issues, arguments, disputes, quarrels and violence of all sorts. How do we resolve conflicts? Some of us seem to deal with it quite well, like the church minister who solved the squabbles between two members of the staff by telling them to "*step into the hallway and hash it out. If you cannot reach an agreement in fifteen minutes, I'll have to recommend the M&P Committee to let one of you go.*" In five minutes, they were back. Both were smiling. Sounds easy to do, but others might just do the opposite - like talking behind their backs or holding a parking lot meeting. Some may write a nasty email, copying the clergy to make it more exciting. What about unfriending them on Facebook or unfollowing them on Instagram? And worse, if you can't avoid them on Sundays, you just leave the church! Sounds familiar? But this is not just about church life. We experience these things in our personal life, at our workplaces, in our neighbourhood, in the world.

How do you resolve conflicts? In his first century congregation, Matthew suggested three ways to resolve conflicts in order to seek reconciliation within the community:

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cited from: Charles W. Byrd, "The Weight Of The Cross," in 56 Lectionary Stories For Preaching (Lima, OH: The CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 1993), pp. 43-44.

1- If a member of the church offended you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. Confront the person directly. Tell the truth that you feel hurt. Seek forgiveness. Determine what needs to be done to restore the broken relationship. If this step doesn't work, go to number 2.

2- If confronting the person individually doesn't work, ask a few others to help make a second attempt at holding the person accountable. Matthew recommends inviting two other church members into the conversation, hoping that wise listening and mediation will do the trick. If this second step doesn't work, go to number 3.

3 – Ask the congregation to listen to both individuals. This means you are supposed to stand up in front of the congregation and bring the controversy out into the open for the whole community to hear. This is where church governance steps in. Discipline the one who offends and let them reconcile through forgiveness and love. But sometimes, instead of having an open dialogue and being transparent, we just let the controversy slide. We pretend the conflict, the offense, never happened. Following Matthew's suggestions, an individual, a small group, and finally the church as a whole have all warned the offender, you've repeatedly held them accountable. You've spoken the truth about love. You've sought forgiveness. You want to restore the broken relationship. But if none of the 3 steps work, what's next? As Matthew's words put it, go and live like a Gentile and a tax collector. You have no business in saying that you're a Jesus follower if you can't resolve conflicts fairly and squarely. So harsh but so true!

Friends, if avoidance is our response, then there will be consequences; consequences for us individually, as well as for the whole community. Probably, affection for the community will begin to fade. And maybe the one who violated the community norms will be shunned, ignored, and allowed to disappear. Any way you look at it, the community is damaged, diminished, and possibly bruised forever. Towards the end of this text, we soon realize that Matthew's deep concern is the word community. Community, after all, is one of those "feel-good" words that draw us into comfortable zones - a place where we are accepted of who we are. But the really challenging thing about a community is that it's made up of people – warm-blooded, sensitive human beings! Diverse, different, unique individuals. There are people who are honest, caring, loving, just and appreciative. And there are people who are difficult, challenging, tired, offensive and unreliable. Which means that usually, when we're dreaming about community,

we're often prompted to visualize a perfect gathering— a place where there is harmony and peace, love and compassion all the time. It sounds ideal, but it doesn't always work that way.

We know that a community—whether it is a family, a workplace, a neighborhood, an organization or a church—is never served when we "play nice" all the time or when we sugarcoat conflicts. Susan Andrew offers her wisdom: *“Community is never served when we build factions; perpetuate gossip, and let anger and frustration fester. Community is never served when inappropriate and destructive behavior is not held accountable. So maybe Matthew—with his difficult strategy, with his advice to stop brooding and confront the destructive behavior early and cleanly—has got the right idea. When two or three gather together to confront differences and controversies squarely and lovingly, maybe that is when Christ is in the midst of them...and in the midst of us.”*

What kind of community do we want to be at Bells Corners United Church? Do we want something more meaningful or intimate? Do we want a place that can both encourage us and hold us accountable? Are we looking for a community where we can be honest about our hopes and fears, dreams and anxieties? Do we want someplace we can just blend in or are we looking for a space where we can make a difference – a place where our children are nurtured and grounded in love? Truth be known – here's a description of The Perfect Church written by an unknown author:

*I think that I shall never see,  
A church that's all it ought to be;  
A church whose members never stray,  
Beyond the straight and narrow way!  
A church that has no empty pews,  
Whose pastor never has the blues,  
A church whose members always seek  
And none is proud, and all are meek;  
Where gossips never peddle lies,  
Or make complaints and criticize;  
Where all are always sweet and kind  
And to all others' faults are blind.  
Such perfect churches there may be,  
But none of them are known to me.  
But still we'll work and pray and plan  
To make our own the best we can.*

Here's my personal hope for all of us here at BCUC. As we enter this new season of our community life, let us listen with good intention. May we all foster a listening heart - a heart that nudges us to be present, to be honest, to be truth tellers, to listen with integrity and empathy. Let's not get locked up in our old ways of closed-mindedness. Let's not act as if a full calendar makes a fulfilled life and a deep community. Let us listen to our own longings and the longings of others and the reality of pain and hurt in the world as Jesus taught us. Be open. Be forgiving. Be loving. Be accepting. Be welcoming. Wherever two or three are gathered in good times and in bad times, in joys and in sorrows, in times of deficit and in times of surplus, God is with us and will always be. Thanks be to God. Amen.