

**GETTING ALONG**  
Sermon Presented to St. Paul's Church  
17 Pentecost, Matthew 18:15-20, Year A  
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In 1994, Winston Groom's book *Forrest Gump* was released as a movie. Starring Tom Hanks as the main character, the movie was a hit and one of the more popular movies in the 1990's.

As you recall, *Forrest Gump* is about a loving, but intellectually limited person who looked at life in terms of how it *should* be lived, with a sense of fairness, innocence, and respect for others. He also showed his world what the true meaning of commitment was all about, especially in his personal relationships with his mother, his wounded and troubled friend Jenny, and his other close friends, Bubba and Lieutenant Dan.

The tragic character Jenny, if you remember, was the girl with whom Forrest Gump grew up. She was an angry person, having been abused as a child by her father. It was this abuse that caused Jenny to want to achieve so she could move away from her father and the circumstances of her youth.

Forrest loved Jenny and told her so while they were in college. She rejected him for a time and bounced from one meaningless, and sometimes abusive relationship to another. Forrest, however, never gave up on Jenny and his love for her seemed to strengthen each time she rejected him. Forrest remained faithful because he could feel her pain and knew she was hurting.

Jenny's anger also had a strangle hold on her spirit, as evidenced in a scene in the movie. Forrest and Jenny were in their hometown and went for a walk. They came to her old house that she grew up in. Immediately all her horrible memories of that place

swept over her. In her anger, she started throwing rocks at the house. She kept throwing them until she fell to her knees exhausted.

Forrest looked at her and in his voice as the narrator said, “Sometimes, I guess there are just not enough rocks.”

Forrest was right about there not being enough rocks. In fact, that’s a good metaphor for how many folks deal with conflict in their lives. Rather than trying to restore strained relationships, they continue to throw rocks and never seem to have enough of them.

Throwing rocks is very much a part of the human condition. In fact, it happens in any context where humans are involved. It can happen in families, like Jenny’s. It can happen at work. “Going postal” is a term that describes the kind of violent rage that goes on in the workplace.

The reason for much of this is that we just can’t let things go. When things don’t go our way, something inside us boils up and we want to get even. The problem with getting even is that we are never satisfied with the results. Revenge is never sweet enough. Consequently, we keep throwing rocks.

Throwing rocks happens at a personal level, too, except we are not so obvious in the ways we throw rocks at our discontent with life. We hurl them by having quarrels at mealtimes, by slamming doors, by continuous outbursts of profanity, or by overindulging our appetites to help us forget. Or, we internalize this rage and succumb to depression.

To me, however, the worst context for throwing rocks is within the Church. There never seems to be enough rocks to satisfy those who have an axe to grind with

respect to their fellow Christians. This isn't unique to the Episcopal Church, either. It happens within every denomination and among different denominations.

Yet, no matter how distasteful it is to me, the bottom line is that we will, from time to time, fight one another in the church. We will disagree. And, on occasion, we will strongly disagree. Our disagreements come about largely because of the uniqueness and individuality of people. We are, in a word, different from one another. If we were all cast from the same mold, there would likely be no difference of opinion, no variation in viewpoints, nor disagreements and conflict.

Even so, Christians are charged to not stay at odds with each other. In other words, they must be intentional about restoring strained relationships. And so real Christian community is not the absence of conflict but the presence of a reconciling spirit, a spirit that enables us to face up to and deal with our conflicts, the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Consequently, the Christian community is not a place where we don't fight, it's the place where we fight faithfully.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus takes for granted that conflict is a reality. It is bound to happen. And so Jesus rightly encourages us to admit conflict's existence and confront it openly and directly. Jesus encourages us to "fight faithfully."

In order to "fight faithfully," we have a biblical responsibility to go directly to the person we're having the conflict, and not build a spiritual SWAT team to ambush that person later or to complain and talk about the conflict to everybody else. And when someone complains to us about someone, we have a biblical responsibility to say to that person, "You're talking to the wrong person. Go to the person you are at odds with and resolve it in a God-glorifying way."

And how do we resolve conflicts in a “God-glorifying way?” Well, you don’t throw rocks. Think about it—children hit back if hit. Adults trade insult for insult. Some folks shut down all communications; while others talk too much through slander and gossip. Some folks get mad and hold a grudge, and others try to laugh it off and pretend nothing’s wrong, smiling to the face while stabbing in the back. None of these ways of coping with conflict is “God-glorifying.”

For Jesus, his goal was not to sever but to restore the relationship, “to regain that one lost sheep.” In his mind, no one was expendable within the context of a Christian community. So it is for us. We cannot afford to lose a single soul. *No one is expendable!* To this end we must always be in the soul restoring business. For in this community—the Christian community—*our* community, there is no bailing out, no walking away, no quitting on account of our conflicts. This is because the Christian community, like the unconditional love of God expressed in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is bigger than that.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus tells us what to do if a member of the church sins against us. He does this by telling us to first point out the fault when the two of you are alone. Make no demands of reparation or threats of judgment. The hope is to gain a good relationship. If you are not listened to, Jesus says, point out the fault with one or two others whose purpose is to witness the effort, to see if you are taking the chance to regain the other. If you’re still not listened to, point out the fault to the church. If the person refuses to even listen to the church and will not be regained, then treat that one as a Gentile or tax collector, not so you can completely write them off, but so that the Gospel can be brought to them to help enlighten them about the truth and the necessity of

reconciliation. Remember that throughout the gospels, Jesus went to and had table fellowship with outsiders, nonbelievers, tax collectors and sinners. This is our duty as well.

I think all of us need to be continually reminded about this passage from Scripture. We need to be reminded of it so that when we encounter conflicts within the church, we deal with them gracefully and faithfully so that our actions are indeed “God-glorifying.”

I believe the primates and leaders in the Anglican Communion should also review Matthew 18:15-20 as well so that their actions might be God-glorifying as well. This is especially true with respect to the ongoing conflict that exists within some factions of the Communion and the Episcopal Church. Even after Lambeth, the various factions don’t seem to be closer to resolving their differences. However, taking their cue from Jesus’s teaching in today’s passage from Matthew, there are some who have put down their rocks and are working to restore relationships—critical relationships—despite their various differences.

Alice Gordon provided me an email she received the other day that explains how one bishop is taking Matthew 18:15-20 to heart. The bishop in question is The Rt. Rev. Duncan Gray, III, bishop of the Diocese of Mississippi. He was participating in the Windsor Report Continuation hearing last July in anticipation of the Lambeth Conference. In their discussions, he addressed a criticism leveled against the Episcopal Church by bishops opposed to the ratification of Gene Robinson’s election as bishop. Specifically, these complaining bishops charged that the bishops who voted to approve Robinson’s election had no “church in them.” Bishop Gray responded as follows: “A bit

of personal history: I have been nurtured and shaped within the Evangelical tradition of my Church. Most important, this means that the ultimate authority of the Holy Scripture and the necessity of an intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus as the way to the Father are foundational and non-negotiable components of my faith.

Within my own province, I voted not to consent to the election of Gene Robinson, for reasons both theological and ecclesiological. I have followed to the letter and the spirit of the Windsor Report—before there was a Windsor Report.

For my faithfulness to this communion I have been rewarded by regular incursions into our diocese by primates and bishops who have no apparent regard for either my theology and ecclesiology. I have made peace with this reality, preferring to think of these irregularly ordained as Methodists—and some of my best friends are Methodists!

What I cannot make peace with is the portrayal of my sister and brother bishops in the Episcopal Church, who disagree with me, as bearers of a false gospel. That portrayal does violence to the imperfect, but grace-filled, and often costly way, in which they live out their love of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yes, I am in serious disagreement with many of them on the very critical sacramental and ethical issues about which the Communion is in deep conflict. Are we sometimes, at best, insensitive to the wider context in which we do ministry, and at worst, deeply embedded in American arrogance—Absolutely! And for that insensitivity and arrogance we have begged the Communion's forgiveness on several occasions. 'But do I see the Church in them?' as the most serious question at the last hearing asked. As God is my witness, I do. Despite my profound disagreements I continue to pray, 'One

Lord, one faith, one baptism.’ We continue to reaffirm our creedal faith together. We continue to gather around the Lord’s table together, bringing the brokenness and imperfectness of our lives into the healing embrace of our Lord who sends us out together to the poor, the weak, and the hopeless. And, in the midst of our internal conflicts, they show me Jesus.

There are dozens of bishops like me in the Episcopal Church. We are not a one, or even two dimensional Church. We are a multitude of diverse theological, ecclesiological, and sacramental perspectives—and a vast majority of us have figured out a way to stay together.

How is this possible? I think it begins with the gift from St. Paul, who taught us the great limitations of even the most insightful thought. We do, everyone of us, ‘see through a glass darkly.’ And none of us can say to the other, ‘I have no need of you.’

One day, Saint Paul says, we will see face to face, the glory that we now glimpse. But in the meantime, as each of us struggles to be faithful, may each of us, The Episcopal Church and the wider communion, find the courage, the humility, to say to one another, ‘I need you—for my salvation and for the salvation of the world.’”

I hope all of us will see, as Bishop Gray does, that despite our differences, the last thing we should ever do within the Church is to walk away from those we are at odds with. This is true within the context of our own community here. It isn’t a matter that Christians are perfect and will not have conflicts. There will always be quarrels, differences of opinion, disappointments with clergy and vestries, hurt feelings, and lots of mistakes. It’s the idea that Christians can resolve these conflicts as no other fellowship

can, that Jesus puts before us today. Try to always remember, as Jesus tells us, that no matter what, everyone is important in this place and no one is expendable.

**AMEN**