

Confront and Respect

Matthew 18:15-20

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC, Camden, September 6th, 2020

¹⁵ “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

Confrontation! What happens to you when you just hear that word: CONFRONTATION? I don't know about you but I get quite uneasy and know that a part of me gets on high alert, wondering if I have to defend myself or get out of Dodge. Fight or flight or even freeze are common responses but what does the word actually mean? It first of all means turning around to “front” each other, to come face to face with each other. How else can we encounter each other authentically but to come face to face? In and by itself, coming face to face can make all sorts of things possible – if we actually allow ourselves to learn who is facing us beyond our projections of who we think the other is. Confrontations can be fruitful if they come from a place of respect. Here is another curious word: RESPECT. It comes from the Latin *re-spectare* which means *to see again*. To see someone again may actually mean to truly see them for the first time for who they actually are. That takes commitment, curiosity, time, self-awareness, looking for a larger reality than what I perceive or believe at first.

We need confrontation in the spirit of mutual respect in our day. Sadly, we have plenty of confrontation. The news has been full of it and the number of dead attest to it. Anthony Huber and Joseph Rosenbaum were killed by 17 year old Kyle Rittenhouse during a Black Lives Matter protest. Another person was severely injured. In his mind, Rittenhouse was acting like a good citizen in support of the police and property owners who feared seeing their possessions destroyed or looted. Of course, all this was set in motion because Jacob Blake, a black man, was shot in the back seven times and paralyzed during a recent arrest. A few days ago, Aaron

Danielson, a member of the right-wing Patriot Prayer group was apparently shot by Michael Forest Reinoehl during a counter protest to Black Lives Matter. Reinoehl has been associated with left-wing ANTIFA and was killed when he resisted arrest. Aside from Blake, these were all white people shooting and getting shot. When they confronted each other face to face, things ended deadly.

Part of the sadness I feel in all this is that none of these men actually knew each other. I can't pretend to know them either and realize that I just described them with some labels found in the news. It's a reminder of how little we often know of each other and that heightens the tension when we meet in charged situations like demonstrations. I do think there is a time and place for protest, giving voice to injustice and calling for change. Neither I nor the vast majority of protesters condone violence or looting, no matter who perpetrates it. The question remains how we respond to such violence and how we act when faced with confrontation in our own lives.

The text from the Gospel of Matthew is a first century C.E. Christian take on what to do when people hurt each other. Christian communities are human communities. We are not free from projection and ways to hurt each other in our ignorance or fear. Not then, not now. How we deal with conflict and confrontation matters greatly. In a text unique to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus offers a process. It presumes that someone has a legitimate reason to name how they have been hurt by a community member and to ask for change. The process also presumes that a person has the spiritual and emotional centeredness and wherewithal to address their pain. This is not always the case as many survivors of trauma can attest.

Jesus says, if someone in your community has caused you real harm, go talk to them directly. In other words, don't triangulate, don't talk behind someone's back, have a face to face. If you don't feel you have been heard or seen, take others from the community with you to listen to the exchange. If that doesn't make a difference, you have made a good faith effort and are released from having to do what you can to heal this relationship.¹ Matthew is trying to grapple

¹ I am struck by how Matthew tends to opt for judgment and exclusion at times in his portrayal of Jesus. I find it ironic that Matthew suggests that Christians should treat church internal offenders who don't come around as though they were "Gentiles" or "tax collectors" – that is outsiders who don't belong. Jesus actually actively

with the question of when enough is enough in terms of trying to heal broken relationships when there is no reciprocity of love. People in his own community were likely facing this challenge. The stakes of addressing harm and transforming relationships are high. The Gospel reads: “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt 18:18). There is lasting power in what we do to each other and it reverberates. We can bind each other in pain or we can free each other in love. What we have witnessed in Kenosha and Portland amounts to binding each other in further pain.

I suppose that Jesus wants to wake us up to the impact of our choices for ill or good. The next verse spells out what is possible in a more positive vein: “Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father/Mother in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt 18:19-20). Let’s try to unpack this a bit. As Barbara Brown Taylor points out, a unique feature of our faith is that we encounter God in and through our relationships.² Our faith is not a private but a relational matter in community. Injustice and harm done need to be named and acknowledged. At the same time, the one who has done harm is also more complex and cannot be limited to their deeds. We have to actually find ways to empower each other to meet each other in love, not condemnation, to grow and risk changing.

From a human perspective, there is always a story that shapes us that itself is interwoven intricately with stories of our family, our community, and so much more. Opening to these stories can be a way of peeling away the layers of fearful or self-righteous reactivity so often present when we come face to face around a tense issue. Daryl Davis is not only a musical virtuoso but also a virtuoso when it comes to seeing beyond the surface. He is a black musician who made it his passion to understand why white people hated him without even knowing who he was. His first encounter with racism came at age 10. He had moved to Massachusetts and

reached out to Gentiles (non-Jews) and tax collectors and offended the religious establishment of his day by doing so. For Matthew who is mostly speaking to Christians of Jewish origin, they have become outsiders again.

² See her sermon called “Family Fights” in *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*, Westminster John Knox, Louisville, KY: 2004), 83.

was given the honor of carrying the US flag for his Cub scout troop when they marched along the Lexington to Concord March recalling the ride of Paul Revere. He was the only black kid in his troop. Some people in the crowd started to call him names and throw rocks and bottles. His troop rallied around him to protect him but no one would answer his question about why people were angry at him and what he had done wrong. That night, his parents sat him down and talked to him about racism. Daryl refused to believe that people would just hate each other without knowing each other. Other negative experiences followed. Over the year, Daryl read about white supremacy and decided to have a face to face with people from the KKK.

He set up an appointment with the Grand Wizzard, Roger Kelly, without revealing that he was black. Amazingly Roger Kelly accepted the invitation and showed up with his body guard. He was taken aback by the fact that Daryl was black but agreed to talk. Roger went on about the need to segregate the races and how white people were superior, etc. Daryl listened and was thankful in a frame of mind and heart where he did not internalize the hatred and nonsense. He would show up at KKK rallies and always talk with Roger. Roger would come to Daryl's concerts. Eventually, he even came to Daryl's house for a meal with his bodyguards. Before long, Roger would turn up without the body guards just to talk. It took years of many a face to face but eventually Roger even spoke out at a KKK rally. He knew he would get into trouble but he said that he respected Daryl more than many white people he knew because Daryl really respected him as a person. This wasn't about respect for authority but about actually being seen for who he was. From there, the journey continued with Roger actually beginning to see Daryl more clearly. Roger quit the KKK and presented Daryl with his Grand Wizzard outfit as a testimony to the love and patience Daryl had shown.

I share this story because I admire Daryl Davis for his courage to come face to face until both men could see each other beyond the surface labels. Now let me be clear, the onus should not be on black people to get the world to change. The onus should not be on people who have been hurt to do so much of the work. Still, Daryl somehow had the rootedness and faith to engage and even make room in his heart for the experience of another who caused him harm. I think he was able to see beyond the veil of toughness and supposed superiority. Daryl respected Roger. He saw Roger again in a new way and noticed a man who hungered to be seen

as a valuable, beloved, human being. Roger had been looking in the wrong places for that, at great cost to many, including himself.

Of course, this need played itself out to a large extent on the level of the human ego that sees itself as the center of all that is. There is something beyond that that actually sustains us. I think Daryl Davis understood that. Many of the great spiritual traditions say that there is something of God in all of us that is precious, inviolable and beautiful. The Buddhist speak of seeing “the original face.” Christian mystics say that our truest identity lies “hidden in Christ,” to use Paul’s language. So, on the one hand it is precious and important to come face to face as the fragile and unique, beautiful and complex people that we are. Daryl and Roger needed to meet face to face. At the same time, they eventually glimpsed in each other face to face something more lasting and precious – their “original face,” if you will – free of the distortions of prejudice and human fear. Here love matters even more than understanding.

We are not always ready for that. Thankfully, our Gospel tells us that Christ is still in our midst when we come together. I trust that even when we fail to meet each other this way, Christ still holds us in our shared suffering in compassion. May the Holy Spirit prosper in us the holy work of learning to see each other face to face in our own families, our faith community, with our friends and perceived foes. If we can even share in our intention of asking for this grace together, God in Christ can do great things. Thanks be to God.