



Reflection: Where Two or Three Are Gathered

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

One of the great gifts of walking with a couple engaged to be married is the chance to share in premarital counseling. Each person in the relationship fills out an inventory online and then when they are done, we get together to walk through their answers. The inventory scores their relationship in fifteen areas. Not surprising, the second area that is scored, after communication, is conflict resolution. How two people deal with the difficult moments in their lives can be an invaluable moment in securing the joy of their relationship. Early on in my ministry- I sat with a couple – where to the question of whether or not the bride was pregnant – the bride answered “yes” and the groom answered “no.” Sensing a possible gargantuan conflict, I asked the woman to step outside of my office to grab a bottle of water and then asked her if she was planning on telling her soon-to-be husband that she was pregnant. She said she thought it would be fun if I announced the impending birth. I shared with her that I did not think that would be fun at all. And when we entered back into the office, after a prayer, she announced the news – to which her future husband responded with great surprise and joy – but I did imagine a far more difficult response as I sat waiting for her to share the news. Conflict is usually inevitable in any relationship. No matter how wonderful the relationship between two people – conflict happens – because there are two people. Jesus knew conflict would take place and provides us a roadmap for the journey.

"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." Many Christians in the church have little problem with this first step. Pointing out each other's faults seems to be the happy pastime of some Christians. This first part of the Conflict Management Program is called The Perfect Problem. (Because I am perfect and no one else in the church is as perfect—save Jesus—I must help others to know their faults.) Most of us in pointing out other's mistakes forget to take inventory of our own shortcomings—and on occasion I have seen this first step work very well when two members have had a serious dispute and solved it by sitting together and asking for forgiveness. However, Step 1 does not always work and so Jesus offers us Step 2.

"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." This second part of the Conflict Management program is often referred to as "I've called up my two best friends and brought them along to really rub it in." It's a long title but it really helps to describe the usual tone of the situation. Now this step can sometimes be short-circuited by conversations that happen in the parking lot or around the coffee pot. Sometimes, you and I get into trouble because we think no one else is listening when we speak or perhaps the person we are speaking with decides to share it with someone else without our permission. This part of the program also runs into trouble when the two people who have the problem don't speak to each other but to everyone else until everyone in the church has an opinion.

And finally Step 3: *"If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church."* This part of the program is called "Let's see who has more friends in the church and can get the other kicked out or at least alienated." Why does it often feel as if the Body of Christ is that place where everyone needs to take a side and have an opinion and prepare to do battle? Now of course I am being just a tad sarcastic, but this is truly how some churches and, more importantly, how some Christians operate. It was never God's intention for the gift of forgiveness to be used and abused in such a way, but it is the pattern most of us find ourselves in at one time or another. Forgiveness is not something we do well much of the time as Christians. Confrontation, we do that pretty well. In fact, some of us have raised it to an art form. But forgiveness, is a little more difficult. Perhaps that is the

reason Jesus spoke so often of God's forgiveness for our sins. Could it be that our need for forgiveness is only won out by our need to forgive? How often do we use that word in our daily speech? Forgiveness is a two-edged sword. On one side there is the need to be forgiven which tells us that we have done something wrong. On the other side there is the need to forgive which somehow, we believe, puts us into a position of power to tell someone else I forgive you. And if the other person does not think they have done anything wrong, where does that leave us? And somehow Jesus knew we would find ourselves in the midst of such difficult wanderings. Because he continues his teaching with...

"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. 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." Jesus knew that forgiveness would be hard to learn for those who followed him and even harder to teach others who were experiencing church for the first time. The joy of the challenge of forgiveness is learning new things about ourselves. The pain of the challenge of forgiveness is learning new things about ourselves. The joy of the message of Jesus this day is that we are called to something even greater than ourselves. What are the final words of Jesus this day? *"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."*

The Body of Christ, for all of its challenge at times, is still the best way to reflect the love of God in Jesus Christ for the world. And so, we keep gathering and praying and worshiping and learning what it means to be the body of Christ in the world — a reflection of God's own heart for all the world to see. Peace be with you this day. Amen.