

**IT'S WE, NOT JUST ME** (MT 18:15-20)  
Sermon given by the Rev. Corinne Hodges  
Sunday, September 7, 2008, St. John of the Cross

This past week I was visiting a parishioner in a hospital which brought back memories. In 2001, I did a nine-month stint as a chaplain intern in a Chicago suburban hospital. I learned a great deal as I ministered to patients and their families. It's not surprising that often I encountered conflict between family members dealing with life changes, big decisions and lots of stress and anxiety. For example, not everyone would agree on the best treatment or course of action for their loved one. In fact, family members or close friends would sometimes ask me to intervene on their behalf. My supervisor and I would talk about this. She was a wise, experienced leader and I still recall a powerful quote she shared with me, "If we all took care of our own stuff, there would be a lot less stuff to take care of."

Self-care has been a popular subject for quite a while now. And there is a lot of truth about the need for each of us to tend to our selves, not only for our own sake, but for the well-being of those around us. But this quote can also be interpreted as saying something about taking on things that we should not. Quite frankly, sometimes we get into other people's business. This saying seems to suggest just keep your head down, don't meddle in other people's lives, and the world will be better as a result. If only life were this simple!

All three of our readings today say something about getting involved in other people's lives. In our Old Testament reading, there's Ezekiel who God appoints as a sentinel. He is given the difficult role of being the watchman, the one who is to warn people when they are doing wrong and advise them of their need to turn their lives around and repent. Not a job many of us would want! Ezekiel is not responsible for what the people do, but he is obligated to tell them of their errors.

Then there is the beautiful reading from Romans. Paul provides us with a shortcut to the Ten Commandments: all we need to do is love our neighbor as we love

ourselves. (There's that self-care message again.) If we love our neighbor, we won't do any of those other bad things like steal or commit adultery.

Finally there is the gospel, outlining a neat and orderly three-step process to resolve conflict within the church. When we are hurt by a member of our congregation (church here refers to the local congregation not worldwide), we are first of all to confront them one-on-one. Try to work it out between the two of us. If that does not work, then bring 1-3 witnesses and try again. If that still does not yield results, bring it to the church and make an effort to work it out as a group. It's kind of like that old saying, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again."

Think back to a time in your life when you had a disagreement with another. Do you remember who confronted whom? Did you try to talk it through once, twice, three times? Many of us do not extend this kind of effort. It's too hard, takes too much time and energy. It's easier to just give up and walk away.

The fact is that we do not live isolated, solitary lives. As Christians, we are called to live in community and that often means getting into the messy business of resolving conflict. But what is the best way to do this? Our readings today give us two principles to take into account. These two reminders, when applied to challenging, tense conversations or situations, can change everything.

The first is that Jesus is present. We often forget this. In Matthew, Jesus says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among (or amidst) them." Go back to that scene with the person you had a confrontation with. Did you remember that Jesus was there with you? Picture the three of you gathered at the table discussing whatever it was you disagreed about. Aware of Jesus' presence, how would the conversation have changed? What would you have said differently or not said at all? What might the results have been? Could there have been greater understanding and respect, the restoration of a relationship, an agreement to disagree but move on? What if we could see Jesus here right now, sitting in this pew? How would that affect the way we might be treating someone in this church family?

The other helpful image we are given today is love. Imagine the scene of your disagreement once again. Was loving that person first and foremost on your mind? Was he/she loving toward you? If you both had considered what the most caring and compassionate thing to do would have been, how would that have changed things? Often when we take love into account, we can look past the petty, futile details and focus on the greater good.

There is this saying in our gospel reading today that we all have heard many times before, in fact we heard it just a couple weeks ago. “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” In Jesus’ time, bind and loose were judicial terms for forbid and permit. When we keep Jesus and the command to love our neighbor in mind, we find we forbid far fewer things and permit much more. We realize that we are often being too strict and that we need to be more generous, giving and loving. Yes, there will be times when we cannot reach a resolution and need to walk away, but in most cases, we will need to go back to the table, to work on preserving the relationship and reconciliation again.

How do we remember that Jesus is with us, especially in those tough moments when we disagree with another? When things get heated, vocal and ugly, how do we remind ourselves to love the person we want to hate? Last Sunday I was talking with a parishioner who asked me for a pen. She wanted to write something on her hand as a reminder to do something we were talking about. Maybe writing the name “Jesus” or the word “love” on our hands would help? Maybe when we are sitting down with someone to discuss a disagreement, we should place an extra chair at the table as a reminder that Jesus is there listening? All of us have ways to remember things...tying a yellow ribbon around a tree, using Post-Its, wearing a charm on a necklace we touch each day. Each of us has to come up with our own way. For Christ is present. He was there when we had the dispute with our friend/family member and he will be there next time as well.

As Christians, we are called to live a life that is community oriented, not self-oriented. With Christ as our focal point, our compass, we can act in more loving ways.

The nature of the Christian life is that we are responsible to and for each other. It's about we, not just me.