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**11/5 – Working Out Conflict** - Relationships are not an easy thing to maintain, especially when conflict arises. But Jesus teaches his followers to resolve conflict in healthy, relational ways – ways that have lasting impacts in our lives, and the lives of others.

**Romans 13:8-10** - Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

**Matthew 18:15-20 (MSG)** “If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you’ve made a friend. If he won’t listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. If he still won’t listen, tell the church. If he won’t listen to the church, you’ll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God’s forgiving love. Take this most seriously: A yes on earth is yes in heaven; a no on earth is no in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this. When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action. And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I’ll be there.”

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This morning we open a new series on community – the imperfect community that we live out in our homes, churches, and everyday lives in the public sphere. God created each of us to be in relationship with one another, loving and caring for each other... which is all well and good, until conflict arises, until someone hurts another person, whether intentionally or by accident and that loving, caring community breaks down to anger, frustration, and pain. The contemporary society we find ourselves in is a high conflict, polarized environment, and it would be surprising if we (the church) remained unaffected. If our task is to make God’s love and justice real, we need to be willing to have honest conversations about hard things - conversations about racism, climate change, gender and sexual identity, inclusivity and welcoming

the stranger - and we have to know that we will push a few buttons, not only within our congregation, but out in the outside community as well.

Conflict in church is especially hard for people to understand though, because we hold such high expectations for unity, love, and holiness from our faith communities. It's almost like we expect people to behave like angels when they join a church, never causing harm to others, or getting their own feelings hurt in return. Well, folks, I hate to break it to you, but we're not perfect. Here in this church, like EVERY other church, conflict happens... toes are stepped on, feelings get hurt, and disappointments come... We're human, and being part of a church doesn't change that... but what it CAN influence is how we deal with that conflict.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus gives guidelines for conflict management in a church community, and they start with facing conflict out in the open, through face-to-face conversations. If you feel someone has wronged you, or you are upset by something they said, go talk with them in private and see if you can work it out. It's sound advice, but it isn't as easy as it sounds. How many of us lie awake at night trying to figure out how we're going to approach a challenging conversation, and end up putting it off as long as possible. Confronting conflict with love and graceful listening is much harder than talking behind people's backs, sending a biting text or posting something on Facebook, or sending anonymous feedback to get your point across. Over time I have learned two things about difficult conversations.

#1: most of the time, a simple, direct conversation clarifies things. Most people respond well to open, non-blaming honesty. Using "I" statements can be extremely helpful to communicating how you feel, rather than shifting the blame to another.

#2: When we put off a difficult conversation, it is rare that the situation gets better all by itself. Initiating a chance to clear the air is usually the best option, even though it is hard.

What about the times it doesn't work out? Jesus says to get some help. Find a mediator, go to couples therapy or family counseling. Things can get too hot to handle, when emotions run deep. My second year in seminary, I lived in an intentional community with 4 friends. The year started out great - if not a little idealistic - with a community contract about how we would be

intentional about time and meals spent together... but by the end of the first semester, tensions were high and we could barely stand to be in the same room together. We scheduled a mediation session with our chaplain who helped us to see our struggles and talk them through. We worked out a chore chart, a plan for paying for groceries, and revised the covenant to be a bit more realistic. We listened to each other and recognized where the hurt feelings were stemming from... It was important for us to reach out for help when we could no longer solve our problems on our own.

Occasionally though, the tension is so bad, there is no moving past it and you need more decisive action or to create some healthy boundaries. There were two individuals in our house who became oil and vinegar, they couldn't stand each other, and even after mediation, they could not talk about their feelings and differences. We fixed what could be mended within our intentional community, finished off the year and disbanded. While 3 of the original members reformed a new community in a different apartment the following school year, bringing in 1 new roommate, the two who went head to head have never reconciled – they went their separate ways, never to look back. While this separation was not taken lightly, in this instance, at least for that season, it was necessary.

Jesus gives pretty clear guidelines for conflict management starting first with the individuals at the heart of the conflict and working out from there if necessary. Unresolved conflict ought not to happen in a silent corner, behind closed doors where differences in power can overwhelm the weak. Neither should they happen in whispered rumors where the corrosive effect of gossip can pervade our lives.

So, is this a good method for conflict resolution in churches today? Must we confront one another with these prescribed steps, and if they all fail, do we exercise our power to exclude some from our community? I don't necessarily believe this to be taken as a "handbook for resolving church conflicts." Simply following this order of confrontation, checking off the stages, step-by-step, will not guarantee a decision rooted in God's love for us. Instead, what matters here is the concern for the other and the community alike – the recognition that Christ is present where two or more are gathered - whether in worship, committee work, Bible study, youth group – Christ is present, and maybe, just

maybe that might prevent you from speaking a harsh word, or judging someone's actions as intentionally hurtful.

Imagine with me, if you will how our communities might look if we all lived by the spirit of this conflict resolution – one that respects and cares about the wellbeing of the other and the community as a whole – and not just the community within the walls of the church, but the larger political, economic, and social environments as well. If people spoke with love and care, honesty and respect, imagine the impact it would have on our world.

I leave you with these thoughts... Community means caring: caring for people. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says: "He who loves community destroys community; he who loves the brethren builds community." A community is not an abstract ideal. We are not striving for perfect community. Community is not an ideal; it is people. It is you and I. In community we are called to love people just as they are with their wounds and their gifts, not as we would want them to be. Community means giving them space, helping them to grow. It means also receiving from them so that we too can grow. It is giving each other freedom; it is giving each other trust; it is confirming but also challenging each other. We give dignity to each other by the way we listen to each other, in a spirit of trust and of dying to oneself so that the other may live, grow and give. Amen.