

*Almighty God, Source of all, Living Word, Holy Spirit:
may your Word only be spoken, and Your voice only be heard. Amen.*

Six words guaranteed to strike fear into my heart: “I want to talk to you.”
I immediately assume it means I’m in trouble, have done something bad –
who ever says, “I want to talk to you – I think you’re wonderful?”
But if I’m to live as a follower of Jesus, I should find those the best words ever –
because they mean someone wants to tell me how they feel about something.
And where real conversation is, relationship can grow, and healing can happen.

Conflict is a fact of life.

And, because we are living on this side of heaven, conflict is a fact of church life.
The disciples were always squabbling, even when Jesus was still with them.

Churches have conflicts over carpeting, hymns, liturgy, style of music –
and larger issues like authority, scripture, bishops, property, sexuality –
you name it, we got it. My former boss like to say:

“Conflict does not kill churches. Suppressed conflict kills churches.”

He taught me, that if someone is complaining to other people about something
here at church, I need to get in touch with that person and say,
“Talk to me. What’s going on? What’s troubling you?”

Jesus knew conflict was always going to be part of life in his community – notice
he does not say, “Never disagree with one another. Never hurt each other.”
He says to his disciples, “If another brother or sister sins against you...”
here’s what you’re to do.” He anticipates it.

And he lays out a very sensible procedures: First, go. Step 1.

Don’t sit around licking your wounds. Get up, GO, and talk to that person.

Don’t talk to three other people about how that one hurt you – talk to her.

Then, if she won’t listen or respond, you still don’t talk to three other people –

Step 2, you ask three other people to be present when you talk to the one, to
be impartial witnesses, hearing both sides, to be reality and accountability checks.

If the person still refuses to acknowledge his fault, then, Step 3,

you bring him to the whole assembly and if he still refuses, you cut your ties –
unless you do what Jesus did with sinners and tax collectors,
which was break bread and build relationships with them.

It would be nice to give an example of doing this and having it work. I have some. But at least once I utterly failed to do this, and that's a better example.

Someone did a terrible, destructive thing to me, in secret, which had serious consequences, and I could not stop myself telling other people, because it revealed what a witch she was.

And the best thing was – it was true. All I was doing was reporting the facts! My grievance was genuine – who could argue with it?

But I did not talk to her directly – I didn't think she'd be capable of admitting wrong. I didn't think it would serve anything. I ignored Jesus' teaching.

And so I did further violence to the church community– she did violence once, by what she did to me; and I perpetuated it by how I dealt with it.

Did that impede the ministry of that church?

Absolutely, because that way of dealing with conflict was a pattern there.

And it sucked away energy needed for mission.

Jesus proposes another way, a more honest, transparent way –

but it makes us pretty squirrely, especially those last two stages.

Episcopalians don't do "rebuking." We don't take personal grievances public.

Now the fact is, it rarely gets to that point. Step 1 usually produces reconciliation.

Or Step 2. You rarely need to get to Step 3.

But Step 4, that's so unthinkable, we often throw out the whole process.

We don't have the kind of church where we cast people out

But what if a member of Christ Church became convinced of the superiority of white people, and began to send out emails denouncing people of other races, counseling that we have nothing to do with such people?

This person has wounded not only you; they're inflicting a wound on the body, on the congregation, where you know each other.

Would that be an occasion when we might want to try this process Jesus lays out?

That's a dramatic example – can you think of other scenarios? If we had

a really malicious gossip who was spreading vicious rumors about Mary?

Would you be willing to confront that person, first alone, then with a small group?

And if they refused to repent and stop it, ask them to leave this community?

This stuff is more real to our lives than we might think at first.

It's good to be aware when something someone has said or done – or not done

– hurts you, and pray about whether you are to say something to them or not.

The test for me is, is it still taking up brain space several days/years later?
Do I keep rehearsing that grievance in my head? Do I want to tell others?
Is it taking my energy away from what God is calling me to do?
How much energy is released when we finally talk to the person and put that
grievance behind us. How much healing is possible as we learn we can take it.
Jesus isn't saying forget it. He's saying, "deal with it."

And Jesus is talking about something bigger:

he's talking about the power of the Christian community.

He says something amazing: *if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.*"

What we do as the Church in Christ's name has an effect in the heavenly places.

Jesus says it in the Lord's prayer – "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

What we do here has cosmic consequences, and vice versa.

What "agreeing" really means is to be standing together in God's will.

When that happens, the church is unstoppable.

Maintaining unity in the Body of Christ matters, because God actually has something for us to do here, participating in God's mission of restoration.

Church isn't just a personal resource for us – it is our first family, our home, where we connect with God and each other and listen for God's instructions on how God would have us bring new life to this whole world in His name.

If this congregation agrees that God is calling us to do something to help stressed out families in Charles County, that ministry will be unstoppable.

If this congregation agrees that God is calling us to make our food pantry a resource for healthy food and wellness, that ministry will be unstoppable.

Because then we are unified. It will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Paul knew this – he saw how divided some of his churches were over issues.

The Corinthians were squabbling about so many things – sex, money, power.

The usual. The Thessalonians argued about resurrection, Galatians about the Law.

So when Paul writes to the church at Rome, and he gets to that part of the letter where he talks about how they are live as Christians,

unity is the most important thing. He unleashes this barrage of short sentences:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;

love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor...

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

This is a prescription for how we are to live as that new community that God is calling into being, to be Christ's transforming power in the world. None of the things on this list serve our self-interest. None of them come naturally. They are the mark of saints, which we are, believers in Jesus Christ.

Jesus invites us to think more like a family and less like an organization. God has a plan for this family, and we have to be uncluttered to live it out.

We are a family to whom Jesus has made a radical promise:

For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

We not only worship Jesus, my friends – we worship with Jesus.

We gather at meetings with Jesus. We gather at meals with Jesus.

Jesus' presence in our midst demands that we be honest with each other, and open to our own failures, and covering each other's weaknesses.

And Jesus' presence in our midst allows us to be honest with each other, and open to our own failures, and covering each other's weaknesses.

Love one another with mutual affection. That's what the whole list comes down to.

As we do that with passion and honesty, speaking the truth to each other in love, putting each other's needs above our own, letting healing come, and then putting the needs of the world above ours together?

We become the unstoppable church God is calling us to be. Amen.

Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus said, "If another brother [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. 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. 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. 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.** For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.