

OPENING:

The Episcopal Church made news recently—for all the wrong reasons—when the President of the House of Deputies (think the “Senior Warden” for the whole Episcopal Church, the ‘top dog’ among all lay persons) revealed that she had been the victim of unwanted physical contact and verbal intimidation shortly after her election to this position.

This contact and intimidation was, allegedly, committed by a retired Bishop.¹

This can be paired with other episodes of “Clergy Behaving Badly” closer to home here in the Diocese of Virginia, where Title IV cases have recently come to fore involving:

1) An Episcopal Priest who used a church related credit card for his own personal use.²

2) An Episcopal Priest who refused to offer the Eucharist to his parish because he our church’s ties to white supremacy.³

AND the age-old

3) An Episcopal Priest with a background of sexual misconduct.

Recently, I was on a call where someone tried to ask our Diocesan Bishop somewhat of a ‘softball’ question:

The person asked: “What’s been your biggest surprise since become the Bishop in the Diocese of Virginia?”

The Bishop paused and said something like that:

“Having to spend so much time with lawyers dealing with clergy who are misbehaving.”

It was a revealing statement and an embarrassing one.

I draw attention to these examples to highlight that, human nature being what it is, those types of difficulties are also the types of difficulties being addressed in our Gospel reading, and throughout the New Testament. They are a part of every organization, every business, school, family. They touch the well-heeled and the downtrodden, those in the upper echelons of leadership and your ‘average Joe.’

¹ [House of Deputies president shares alleged incident of unwanted physical contact following conclusion of Title IV investigation – Episcopal News Service](#)

² [Virginia State Police investigation underway linked to St. Mary’s Episcopal Church | News | newsontheneck.com](#)

³ [Title IV Hearing Panel Proceedings | The Episcopal Diocese of Virginia \(thedioecese.net\)](#)

Knowing this, we must admit that issues of misbehavior (although hopefully not at that level), and how to solve them, also happen here at St. Timothy's.

“When two or three are gathered”—you might make the sad paraphrase—there will also be conflict and deep hurt, neighbors wronged and resentments boiling.

GOSPEL:

It's comforting, I suppose, to know that the problems that we have in our church today... also were happening 2000 years ago. That Matthew and Jesus were dealing with these same issues, that the early Church was not all hunky-dory, not a 1st century Camelot. Instead, the Church *then* was like the Church *now*, full of human beings prone to mistakes.

We want the ‘Church’ (oh so badly) to not be like the ‘World’, to somehow be immune or quarantined from the petty disagreements and the gossiping and the infighting. Not to mention the bigger issues of sexual harassment, prejudice, you name it.

Spend more than a fleeting moment in it and you realize it's not.

We will never be so pure or perfect or well-meaning to be immune to those pressures.

What we can do is try to be a place where those problems are worked out.

Where reconciliation does happen, where the truth is told, and justice is served, and where Jesus is really among us because we do the things that this passage calls us to do.

DISCIPLINES:

Now the Episcopal Church does not have the same sort of mechanisms and track record that say, the Roman Catholic Church, does with church discipline. Nor do we have, I don't think, the notion of a “Scarlet Letter” or shunning as a part of our DNA like the Puritans did or the modern equivalent do.⁴

I thank God for that.

On the other hand, there is, such as in the cases that I talked about earlier, accountability and procedures, loosely called the “Title IV Process.”

And there are, in our prayer book, on page 409, tucked away in footnotes, in small print, the Disciplinary Rubrics which empower a priest to withhold communion from those living a (quote) “notoriously evil life” and are a (quote) “scandal to the other members of the congregation.”⁵

⁴ Fuller, Reginald. 1981. *Preaching the Lectionary*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 166.

⁵ BCP, pg. 409.

That's an awesome and awful responsibility. The rubric goes on to say, (read it sometime but not now!) the methods by which you restore someone to full communion. And how the bishop must be notified, etc.

Again, I think that section in our Prayer Book gets a little bit at what Matthew is describing in our Gospel as a necessity in any community.

I want to stress that most disagreements and dustups in the church have much lower stakes than the ones that would require *that* sort of action (or the ones I began the sermon with), but they sometimes have *just as much* energy and feeling behind them.

Sometimes it's easier to forgive someone for, say, stealing money from you right under your nose; than it is to forgive someone for the types of things that happen in church and in families that don't have really any monetary value associated them, but have deep psycho-spiritual significance.

Do you get what I am saying? I struggle to give examples because I am worried that, quite understandably, you will think of moments in our shared church life and history and focus there. Just know that this passage struck really close to home for me this week in our common life together.

Know that they abound: times of deep hurt, when a church member has sinned against someone, and the pointing out of fault, and the listening and the regaining of trust here. OR the opposite: when a problem here has been overlooked or ignored here at St. Tim's and then has festered and created a deep wound.

When I taught, there was an educational theory that said that students learn the most from how teachers interact with one another. That the most important lesson in teaching respect and cooperation and truth-telling is how one adult acts when one neighboring teacher knocks on his/her door and needs to borrow the chalk for the millionth time. Or when a music teacher lets their class out late for the umpteenth time and the students are late to your class and you are stewing.

How you act in those moments, which are actual ones, is what young people learn. So much more than the reading curriculum or the equations written on the board.

Church is like that too, how we treat one another here, in our everyday coming and goings, shines the light on who we are, way more than our dogma or our theology.

CHURCH

In the prayer book, in those church rubrics page 409, it uses the word “communicant” to refer to someone who receives the sacrament, it uses the verb “communicate” to refer to someone who offers the bread and wine. We know the word “excommunication” as the process for withholding the same.

“Community” and “communion” is at the root of all those. That’s what we are building when do those hard things that Jesus talks about in our Gospel reading.

The word “Family” is another one that comes to mind in terms of what we are building, and it’s a tricky one for a million reasons, but it’s also what Jesus uses. Our modern translation uses “members” because it’s trying to be politically correct but it really says “brother and sister.” Not biological, but joined together in communion with Christ.

The word “Church” is another way of describing it and here, in this lesson, is one of the only places that Jesus talks about the church, the *Ekklesia*, “those called out.”

Ironically, “Call out” culture, the name given to the process of shaming folks online and elsewhere is the opposite of the procedure described in our gospel, a process of calling IN, of nurturing healing and growth and change through the support of a caring community and church.

Churches should not be places where we are scared to get close enough to have our feelings hurt. Churches should be places where one knows that forgiveness and grace abound. It should be a place where Conflict is sign of growth and of change, rather than of fear or resentment.

To close, Bishop William Willimon said this about the process of Christian formation, which is similar to the educational theory from early.⁶ He said:

Every time you gather for a funeral, that’s the Christian community teaching about death. Same thing for wedding, teaching about love.

We have a particular way of eating (Eucharist)

A particular way of perpetuating itself (through evangelism rather than biological propagation)

A particular way of handling conflict (forgiveness, that’s done through the Peace and through the Confession and through the Eucharist as well, where we all, one family, one community, one church came to one table to share in one bread and one cup) AMEN

⁶ Willimon, William H. 2016. *Pastor: the Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*. (Revised Edition) Nashville: Abingdon, 207