

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sept 6, 2026
St. Michael's Church
The Rev. Joshua Wong
Gospel reading: Matthew 18:15-20

Let us pray: "O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Today's Gospel passage speaks about unity in the church. It is not an easy subject to preach about, because none of us want to admit to or confront disharmony. When we encounter disharmony within the body of Christ, we tend to want to ignore it, pretend it doesn't exist, and not talk about it.

But Jesus doesn't pretend that Christians will always get along. After Pentecost, the church began to expand quickly with greater numbers of people from different cultures and backgrounds. Actually, the church is meant to be comprised of different influences and perspectives. Jesus knows that the church is made up of our unique gifts and diversity, but being human, it includes our flaws as well. Jesus' assumption is that conflict within the beloved community is normal and

natural. The question is not whether it exists or that we might wound each other with our words and actions, but how we should proceed when it happens.

When the church began, new believers from all walks of life were joining as one family. The teaching of, “Love God with all our hearts and Love your neighbor as yourself” was not just a catchy motto Jesus says, but the theological core of the new beloved community Jesus was establishing. As relevant as it was at that time, for the unity of the church, loving God and our neighbor still remains central for unity.

All of us have heard the phrase: “We need to talk.”

Most of the time, if another person approaches us with those words, they’re not saying they want to chat about last night’s football game... they’re saying, “Something is broken between us, and we need to sort it out.”

In this week’s Gospel, Jesus offers us radical instructions to confronting differences in the church. He doesn’t just offer it, he tells us plainly that the way we conduct relationships here and now with each other has direct consequences for God’s coming kingdom. In other words, the depth, health, and quality of our relationships with each other really matter—because they matter eternally. We are

not just a group of people, we are the price Jesus paid for us to become his body in the world. In our Epistle reading today, Paul speaks about how our salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers. Christ will come again when we least expect it. Our relationship with each other is a gift to be cherished and protected. Unity within the church has to do with protecting our God given soul that is within each one of us.

When Jesus speaks about differences, he is not referring to different subjective matters like personal taste or habits. Rather Jesus is speaking about actions and words that can cause damage to our relationship with each other, which then affects the whole church. They are differences and causes that can tear the church apart.

What are some things we do that can cause damage to our relationship with each other which affects the whole church? Are our words and our actions edifying or destructive to another person? Unfortunately, as a pastor, I have heard horror stories about power struggles that break up the church, causing people to have a bad experience of church. I have heard many stories where wealthy donors use their financial power to control the church. These are powerful, toxic examples that destroy a church. I have also heard of many stories involving hateful words

people say that destroy the church. Jesus knows that this issue is not avoidable. And he gives us instructions to follow.

These might be extreme examples of the power of destruction within the church, but there are also seemingly less inconspicuous ones as well. This includes the comments and the jokes we make, or the feeling of inclusion or exclusion that a person feels in our church. How do we treat or welcome someone of influence versus someone who needs our help? How do we treat a transgender person seeking a church to attend?

Paul speaks about a similar idea in Romans when he warns us not to become a stumbling block to another believer. He says that sometimes our choice of action requires us to limit our personal freedoms so we do not lead weaker Christians into sin. His example includes being sensitive to new believers who are still adjusting to worshipping the real God versus idols. If they see a mature Christian eating food once offered to idols, their conscience might be pressured to do the same, leading them to sin against their own beliefs. Therefore, it is better that a mature Christian do not consume food once offered to idols. For us today, we may need to be sensitive and aware of people who are in AA, Gamblers Anonymous, or other addictions they are living with. It may be better for us to not do something that might be temptation to another.

However, there are times when actions and words need to be confronted, as uneasy as it might be, when it does bring damage to the body of Christ. This is when we need to learn how to confront lovingly and wisely.

There are many causes that break up a church—they could be huge things and small things. It could be about theological disagreements or personal disagreements. An example of a serious split is over theological understanding.

During my recent vacation to Morristown New Jersey, our friend Dan, who is the pastor of the city's largest Presbyterian church shared about why there are two large parishes a few blocks from each other. It was during the Abolition of slavery that the church was split over social justice issues. In our own denomination we've had a schism in the early 2000's over the ordination of women and LGBTQia people. The Church went to court over who owns the church property when the conservative group split from the Episcopal Church to form the Anglican Church in North America in 2008 and 2009. The Lutheran Church and the Methodist Church soon followed over the same issues. These may be examples of large schisms within the church, but we encounter everyday smaller differences as well. Therefore, it helps to learn some practical methods about accessing ourselves and accessing others before we confront an issue.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus lays out principles in this Gospel with some rules of engagement that are still relevant in the 21st century. Underneath all of Jesus' principles about conflict management, are the basic tenets of love and respect. Our approach should always have love in mind to guide us in how we speak to each other. There should not be any personal ego or arrogance. Along with that, Jesus says not to do it alone. If you find yourself in a situation where there is disharmony, include someone who is trustworthy and unbiased, or come and speak to me.

During one of my semesters at Claremont School of Theology, I took a class called *Radical Compassion* taught by Dr. Frank Rogers. He wrote a book entitled *The Way of Jesus, Compassion in Practice*. I encourage you to get your own copy. His book offers practical daily methods for us to understand having compassion for ourselves and for others. He starts the semester off by saying that the topic of "Compassion," is very complex, because it involves emotional and personal baggage and trauma all of us carry with us. We don't fully understand what the other person is living through. Just like Jesus' way of compassion, we are called to wisdom in our approach. Maybe sometimes silence is the wisest solution, or maybe confrontation is the wisest solution. Sometimes, you should pray for when the time is right to speak to someone. Whatever it is, it always start by listening to

ourselves and to the other person. Whenever the time may be right, the result should always be based on a healthy intention that leads to more wholeness and holiness to ourselves and to the other person. We must make sure that we are building people up, and not tearing them down. We must also self-examine our own intentions as well. Am I responding because of my own personal hurt or issue, and it has little to do with the other person? What harm is the other person doing to themselves or to the community? Importantly, we are called to be wise when there is no receptivity by the other person. Learning when to release them lovingly can be the best solution.

In his book, Dr. Rogers shares one of the practices based on the acronym PULSE. The invitation is to take a U-turn, to look inward, be still, and to recalibrate our pulse back to the heartbeat of humanity, back to where God is. If you wish, you can close your eyes to hear these following words.

P—Paying attention. Cultivate a nonjudgmental, nonreactive awareness of whatever agitation is present within you or in the other person.

U—Understanding empathically. Listen for and be moved by the suffering hiding within the cry of this agitation, whether it be in you or in another—whether it's fear, a longing that isn't met, or an aching wound in need of tending.

L—Loving with connection. As you are moved by the suffering within you or in the other person, extend care toward the need of wound that presents itself.

S—Sensing the sacredness. Recognize and savor the infinite expanse of God’s compassion that holds and heals the suffering within you or in the other person.

E—Embodying new life. Notice the gifts and qualities of restored humanity that are being birthed within you and the other person.

In taking our PULSE or the PULSE of the other person, we are not only calming our reactions, repulsions, fears, and drives that distort our natural humanity but we are also tending to the wounds and needs hidden within them. In doing so, we are restored to our natural and compassionate selves. You will become more aware of what triggers you or another person, and **when** you need to be more compassionate towards yourself or another person. If you’d like to review the acronym PULSE, you can reread today’s sermon transcript on our website under the red tab that says “NEWS, CALENDAR, VIDEO.”

Understandably, this topic is complex. If you see actions and words that cause damage to our relationship with each other that can affect the whole church, come and speak with me, don't carry it alone.

I hope from this exercise, you can see what compassion for ourselves and for others can do to bring healing to our relationships with ourselves and to one another. The church will always be diverse and we are to learn how to live in harmony as a community. Let's accept this diversity, and work together to build a safe environment where we can all equally grow and establish our faith. Amen.