

Sermon for September 6 2020 by Pastor Hanberry (Ser20-35)

“Where Two or Three are Gathered Together...You’ve Got a Disagreement”
Romans 13:8-14 & Matthew 18:15-20

Given the state of affairs in our nation, and in community life, the idea that *“if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my God in heaven”* is intriguing, to say the least. So, on the face of it, this verse from the 18th chapter of Matthew encourages us to come to agreement about that which would please God. I think it would please God if there were more agreement about the things of love and kindness and mercy. It would please God if we would lay aside our strong, sometimes hateful speech, and listen to each other more. It would please God if we could even agree to disagree with some sense of respect for each other. All that’s more of a challenge these days than ever before.

It is safe to say that all people, even the most committed, loving couples, for instance, disagree on various aspects of their life together. For example, my wife, Pat, and I almost always choose a different route in the car to some place we might visit in Frederick, where we have lived for many years. Our internal GPS’s are quite different, it seems. Over the years, we have found ways to work out those different ways of seeing the world and getting around in the community. We also have different ideas about what time we should leave our house to get some place on time.

Before I say more about how we’ve worked out those differences or disagreements, let me just acknowledge that I don’t imagine God cares much at all about which route we take to the movies or a place to shop. God, I suppose, cares about our getting there safely. God does care about whether and how we agree about our views of social issues like racism or war and peace.

Nonetheless, Pat and I have figured out how to avoid conflict about the route we take or the time we leave for an activity. For instance, back in the day when we went to the movies, I decided what time we leave home and the route we take, and Pat decides where we sit in the movie. Fair enough, really. We never agree about the best seats to take in the movies. But now we do; she decides. I get to decide on the route to the movie and back home again. As a result, we don’t have any disagreements anymore about these mundane things of our life together. YEA!!

As I read the scripture lessons for this Sunday, I imagine that Jesus was thinking about much more important issues than the mundane things a

couple might disagree about in any given moment of time. This depends in some part on what one might define as a sin...Really, Pastor Gerry? You're going to talk about SIN? Yes, I am. Jesus did. Listen again to what he says in the lesson for today:

15 If another member of the church^[a] sins against you,^[b] go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.^[c] 16 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. 17 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. 18 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. 19 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. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

Can you imagine this happening in these days in the church or in a community or even in a family? Such straight and honest talk is pretty rare. I know in the years of my ministry as a pastor in the UCC folks have been upset or even angry with me for something I said or did. It is sad to say that in most all of those cases very few if any of those folks have come to me and told me of their complaint or grievance toward me. They often tell others but not me to my face or even on the phone or by e-mail. When someone has come to me and told me about something I said or did or didn't do (if you want to call that a sin – as identified by the other person – you certainly may do that) I always respond with a listening ear. I must confess I might sound defensive and or hurt but I really, really try to listen and respond in a way that can allow the other person to be heard.

By the way, I think that is often what we want when we are angry or confused by another. We want to be heard. And I believe that the more we are heard the more we can come to some agreement, at least to a reasonable place of agreement to allow for our differences not to overwhelm our relationship.

Living together with our differences is hard. Living together in love and peacefulness can also be our greatest joy!

Part of what that work for us is trying to accomplish, at the core, is to identify what we can agree on and figure out how to set aside some of the issues or beliefs that are too hard to deal with or that we would never agree and still be in relationship. All this takes work, the kind of work Jesus talks about in the lesson for today.

My wife, Pat, was telling me about this at her noon Rotary Club today. The speaker is the "Restorative Practices" Coordinator in the Frederick Co. Public Schools. Her work is with students who have been suspended for some "mis-behavior" or as Jesus might say, a "sin." When the student returns to the regular classroom (of course, we wonder what that looks like these days) there is some attention given to helping the student "restore" a relationship broken by their "mis-behavior." This might be with a teacher or a fellow student. Students learning how-to live-in peace with their differences and disagreements is good work in these days.

For me, this always involves the work of love for the other. I appreciate what Paul says to the church in the text from Romans for today:

*⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ **Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.***

Paul says a cool thing here: ¹⁰ **"Love does no wrong to a neighbor..."** You want to restore a relationship? Love does no wrong; indeed, love helps heal. All of this depends, of course, on whether you want to restore a relationship. Depends on whether you want to be part of the family, personal family or even church family, in which there may be dis-unity.

I encourage you today to prayerfully consider the disagreements you are having with another person, or with the church or a group within the community. Pray about them. Consider reaching out to someone and "go

and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one” (Jesus speaking in Matthew 18:15).

This is not about my encouraging you to “go and fight” with another person. No, it is about overcoming those things that separate us from those we care about or those with whom we are engaged in the work of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. May it be so for you and me today. Amen.