



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON - May 4, 2008

Is There Union in our Communion?
The Reverend Harold E. Masback, III

Matthew 18:15-20

15 "If another 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. 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."

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Final Greetings and Benediction

11 Finally, brothers and sisters,^b farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal,^d agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. 12 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. 13 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

I am holding in my hands a tattered little record book with odd writing and odd spellings. Do not be deceived by its humble form. I am holding a priceless record of our congregational life together and a document containing ideas that have radically transformed all of human existence.

Now those are pretty large claims, so let me explain. This record book contains the minute notes entered by our fourth minister, Justus Mitchell, recording church decisions and actions between 1783 and 1800. It is a priceless record of our congregational life together because it records the story of how our ancestors understood the privilege and task of being

^b Gk *brothers*

^c Or *rejoice*

^d Or *encourage one another*

^e Or *and the sharing in*

church together, and their understandings are the foundation of both our church and our town of New Canaan.

It is a document containing ideas that have radically transformed all of human existence, because it contains the reaffirmation of our Puritan covenant, a covenant first joined on this hill on June 20, 1733 and reaffirmed here in a vote recorded on the very first page of this register on October 5, 1787. Now, that covenant is very important to *us* because it is still the basis of our congregational life together. Just this morning we recommitted to the covenant as we welcomed new members, just as we have been doing on this hill for 275 years. But it's very important to the *world* because the Puritan covenant would become the basis of constitutional democracy all over the globe.

When our ancestors gathered on this hill in 1733 there was no such thing as a constitution, a republic, a democracy anywhere on the face of the earth. Yet, faced with certain death in the wilderness if they did not find a way to preserve both community and liberty, the Puritans virtually invented the notion of a democratic process bounded and defined by a written covenant, a charter, a constitution. Congregational minister Thomas Hooker and others undertook to write a charter for the colony of Connecticut based on the Puritan covenant.¹ Other colonies borrowed notions of colonial charter from Connecticut, and, on September 17, 1787, the Philadelphia Convention completed drafting the United States Constitution, a document that traces roots directly back to Hooker and the Puritan Covenants.

Harvard historian Perry Miller called the covenant, "the master idea of the age for the Congregationalists."² Just this morning, Andrew Ferguson wrote in the Sunday *New York Times*, speaking of our Puritan ancestors, "these battered and luckless wanderers carried with them a set of peculiar principles that slowly unfolded into a spectacularly successful experiment in freedom, prosperity and human dignity, something unforeseen and without parallel in all history."³ Go inquire into the

foundational documents of modern France, Germany, Brazil, India, Kenya, Israel, Australia, even Russia, and you will find documents who trace their intellectual DNA back to the ideas on these crumbling pages.

This battered book *is* a priceless record of our congregational life and a document containing some of the most consequential ideas in human history. But there's a difference between a priceless artifact and a living document, between a glorious heritage and a vibrant present. The difference lies in whether we are still taking our covenant seriously as a guide for our lives. That's what I'd like to ask after this morning. Are we still taking our covenant seriously as a guide for our lives? When we promise to "walk together in Christian love and sympathy," do we mean that we'll love one another only as long as things are going smoothly? Or do we mean that we'll love one another through thick and thin, even when sharp conflict has broken out amongst us?

Think of our congregational covenant as the communal equivalent of a marriage covenant. For all the joy of a wedding day, the marriage covenant assumes there will be inevitable conflicts in a married life and commits the couple to working through them. Just so, the church covenant assumes there will be inevitable conflicts in congregational life and commits the congregation to working through them. Conflict is not an accidental disruption of life together. Conflict is an unavoidable incident of life together.

The very first page of our ancient record book is a reaffirmation of the covenant. Do you know what's on the very next page of the book? Conflict!

The very first thing we learn about our church in 1787 is that they were still committed to their covenantal obligations to one another. The very second thing we learn is that the Comstock boys were giving the church elders fits. Now I'm not saying the Comstocks were entirely to blame: you can't tell from the entries; but you can tell that Aaron, David, and Abijah Comstock got into one dispute after another with their fellow parishioners. Aaron got into land disputes, charging church moderator Justus Mitchell and others with moving land markers; Abijah Comstock broke an agreement with Stephen

Benedict; and David Comstock was found to have been "walking in a disorderly fashion." (Wouldn't you love to know what that's a euphemism for?)

And the very third thing we learn about our church is that their Puritan understanding of the covenant of "all fraternal love, care and watchfulness," meant that disputes like these were for the congregation to resolve. No private, bitter and costly trips down to the Stamford courts. Disputes *within* the body of Christ *threatened* the body of Christ and were to be resolved, if possible, *by* the body of Christ.

How did they know? They knew because Jesus said so in today's reading from Matthew's Gospel. Jesus knew that conflict would be inevitable. When it comes, he taught, don't suffer in embittering silence, don't run for the fractious lawyers, don't slip away to another church, and don't rally your friends to your side. All these responses weaken our bonds of love. Rather, go first to the one who has hurt you, privately and quietly seeking reconciliation. If you succeed you have regained a brother. You have recovered a lost sheep for God's fold.

If that doesn't work, and *only if* that doesn't work, try a new discussion, this time bringing one or two fair-minded parishioners. Their presence may add new perspectives and help each of you find a path to peace.

Finally, if even that doesn't work, and *only if* even that doesn't work, bring your concerns before the congregation. Perhaps the community's yearning for reconciliation will soften hearts hardened by conflict. For where the community prays for peace in Christ's name, there Christ is to assist us.

"The Church of Christ in Canaan . . . after much labor and patience took on the following vote on the 3 July 1799 . . . that Mr. Abijah Comstock be rejected from the communion and fellowship of this Church, agreeable to the 18th chapter of Matthew, 'if he hear not them, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.' And he is hereby rejected."

Signed, Justus Mitchell, Moderator

Now I have never, ever, preached on Matthew 18:15 before, and I'll bet that few of you have ever heard a sermon on this passage either. Why not? Because the passage disturbs us. It makes us squirm in our seats. Pastors avoid it like the plague. Even if the passage is

divinely inspired guidance, we're pretty sure Christians have misused it; and maybe we even suspect that our own Puritan forbears misused the passage worse than most. (Did somebody say, "witch hunt"?) And maybe even *our* beloved church treated the Comstocks to too much "fraternal watchfulness" and too little "fraternal love." Maybe.

So, what are we to do with this "hard saying" of Jesus? Shall we conclude Jesus was misquoted? That Jesus didn't mean for it to apply to us? That Jesus was wrong? Or is it possible that the "hard saying" charges us with the task of turning it around and around in our mind until we can discover a new perspective, a new way into Christ's insight? Of course, it's the latter project I invite you share with me for several minutes this morning.

First, I invite you to set this nettlesome little passage in context. When you pull back your camera a little bit, you see that Matthew has set this passage on resolving disputes in the midst of a two-chapter discourse on how the early Christian community was to live together after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. And most importantly, Jesus has sandwiched this hard saying about dispute resolution immediately after the parable of the lost sheep and immediately before the parable of the unforgiving servant – parables that emphasize God's will that not a single sheep be lost and that our community be characterized by forgiveness. Whatever dispute resolution is required in our life together must always be tempered with mercy.

Second, I invite you change your camera angle, your angle of view. I'm going to read the parable of the lost sheep, the parable that immediately precedes today's reading. And I'm going to ask you two questions afterwards. First, what feelings, what emotions does the parable stimulate? Does it make you edgy the way today's reading does? And second, where do you see yourself in the story? With whom do you identify?

Here's the parable of the lost sheep:

"What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will

of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost."

So what feelings does the parable stimulate? And with whom do you identify? If the parable is comforting, reassuring, isn't that partly because we identify with the lost sheep? Aren't we comforted here because we identify primarily with the rescued sheep, and aren't we discomfited by today's reading because we tend to identify, at least potentially, with the Comstocks, with the parishioners that face rejection? What happens if we shift, or at least broaden these perspectives a bit?

First, who are the lost sheep? Who did Jesus intend to identify with the lost sheep? Isn't that all of us? Isn't that the story of Exodus, of Passover: that all of us were doomed until saved by the mighty arm of God? Isn't that the story of Easter and of Pentecost, that all of us have strayed, every single one, and all of us owe our salvation to the grace of God? Is there a single person here who cannot remember feeling lost in the dark, cut off from your flock, from a real future – only to be rescued as if by a shepherd's strong hand tossing you over his shoulder and carrying you back to life? We have *all* been the lost sheep.

But if we are each the lost one, then who are the remaining 99, the sheep of the fold, the church in Jesus' imagery? Aren't we each now amongst the 99 as well? Rescued by Christ and baptized into his church, we are all among the 99, all members of the church. Filled with gratitude for our rescue, we join with God in rejoicing over each stray returned to our fold. We are the grateful fraternity of former strays.

So who is left to be the shepherd? And again, isn't that also meant to be all of us? Jesus shepherded the disciples, but after Christ's resurrection the task fell to Christ's disciples to shepherd their early followers. And now, my friends, the task falls to Christ's church, and that would be you and me. We are now, each of us, shepherds charged with seeking out the lost, the fallen, the strays – for we have all been there ourselves and may be there again.

When you bring these perspectives to today's reading on dispute resolution, doesn't the reading swing around on its anchor? It's no longer a procedure to judge and exclude our brothers and sisters: it's a formula for reconciliation, for exhausting all efforts to recover and

welcome home our strays. When someone commits a serious sin against you, don't suffer in embittering silence, don't run for the fractious lawyers, don't slip away to another church, and don't rally your friends to your side. All these responses weaken our bonds of love. Go first to the one who has hurt you, privately and quietly seeking reconciliation. If you succeed you have regained a brother, you have recovered a lost sheep for God's fold. You have been the good shepherd.

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Which leaves of course the hopefully rare case in which reconciliation just isn't possible. And so it was with the Comstock boys. David and Abijah were chastened by their discussions with the full congregation and by their exclusion. They returned seeking reconciliation and were joyfully readmitted to full communion. Aaron was recalcitrant and unable to reconcile after several attempts, so of course the records show he ended up at St. Mark's.

In the end, are we proud of our congregation's efforts two hundred summers ago? Did their zeal for reconciliation exceed their penchant for judgment? You just can't tell from these slender entries. But shouldn't we be inspired by how seriously they took their covenantal bonds? They knew their biblical mandate well, and they approached this communion table with reverence and awe. They undertook their task of reconciliation as if the lives of all the sheep depended on it. Truly there was union in their communion. Is there true union in ours? **Amen.**

1 On May 31, 1638, Hooker delivered a sermon before a general court in Hartford in which he set out his vision for the governance of the newly founded city. "The foundation of authority," Hooker said, "is laid, firstly, in the free consent of the

people." Further, the "choice of public magistrates belongs unto the people by God's own allowance," and "they who have the power to appoint officers and magistrates, it is in their power also to set the bounds and limitations of the power and the place unto which they call them." The founders of Hartford, Wethersfield, and Windsor used this sermon and others from Hooker as a basis for their *Fundamental Orders*, which many political historians regard as the world's first written constitution. It's not for nothing that Connecticut came to be known as the Constitution State.

2 See Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1983). See also Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1970), p. 54.

3 Andrew Ferguson, "Don't Know Much about History," *The New York Times Book Review*, 4 May 2008, p. 14.