

THE CHURCH: GOD'S REALM ON EARTH  
(Matt. 18:15-20)

When I got to Coventry 1994 Second Congregational Church was getting ready to celebrate its 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary. With a big celebration like that coming up, I did some digging into the church's records to learn a bit more about its early days. (I probably would have done more, but the records were on microfilm, and trust me, reading page after page of handwritten documents on microfilm is a guaranteed headache.)

The 1740s when Second Church split off from First Church were turbulent religious times in America. The Great Awakening was in full swing. Revivalism was sweeping the colonies. Jonathan Edwards was preaching up and down the Connecticut River valley. Congregational Churches were splitting between "Old Lights" and "New Lights." So I was hoping to find some great theological dispute, some great church fight, that caused Second Church to break away from First. Unfortunately, I didn't come across anything remotely like that.

It turns out the reasons were a lot more mundane. The people in the north part of town simply got tired of trudging three miles downhill on Sunday morning to get to church and three miles back uphill on Sunday evening to get back home. No wrangling over weighty theological issues, just tired legs.

The most interesting thing I discovered in my research was that Congregational Churches in colonial times practiced excommunication. I always thought of excommunication as a Catholic practice, and our Congregational ancestors were dead set against anything remotely Catholic, or as they might have said, "Papist."

But they excommunicated offending church members for all sorts of reasons, theological and otherwise. One fellow was kicked out for attacking his neighbor with an axe. He may have spent some time in jail, too. But the church ordered him "excommunicated, cast out of the church and delivered to the visible kingdom of Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." That was the usual formula, and it comes from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (5:5).

But the underlying idea that offending church members should be excommunicated or kicked out comes from the words ascribed to Jesus in today's reading from Matthew. I say "ascribed to Jesus" because he probably didn't actually say those words. As the notes in the bulletin point out, there was no church while Jesus was on earth. And Jesus himself never shunned sinners of any kind, so it's hard to imagine him prescribing such a practice.

Goodness knows, there have been plenty of disagreements and fights in the church's 2000 years. We find them in the pages of the New Testament, and we find them in churches today.

Some of the disagreements can be ridiculously trivial – like the flap one church had over how to cut the pies for a church picnic. There was a 6-slice

faction and an 8-slice faction. One woman was actually in tears because of what someone from the opposing faction had said to her.

Of course, sometimes the issues are a bit more weighty. Martin Luther had a major difference of opinion with the Catholic Church. It took him 95 theses just to outline where he thought the church had gone wrong. That set off a church fight that reverberates to this day.

The fact that churches have been disagreeing and fighting from Day 1 is why Matthew puts the words we heard this morning in Jesus' mouth. He wanted to appeal to Jesus as an authority on church unity and church discipline. By Matthew's time – forty or so years after Jesus – the church did exist. And, no surprise, it had disagreements and arguments and bad behavior among church members that led to bruised feelings – all those things that should not happen within the body of Christ but do. In any case, I'm going to follow Matthew and imagine Jesus speaking these words because that's easier than saying "as Matthew has Jesus say" or something like that.

In one sense, nothing has changed since those early days. That's the point I've been making. Nothing has changed, but in another sense, everything has changed – or at least our church culture has changed enough that Jesus' prescription sounds awfully impractical or even dangerous.

In the first place, there's no consensus on what even constitutes a sin. We don't even like to use the word. It sounds too...judgmental. Or maybe self-righteous. "Live and let live" or "different strokes for different folks" – those are the principles that more closely reflect American values.

If there's no consensus on what constitutes an offense, the potential for abuse becomes enormous. A few years ago, a pastor in a North Carolina church tried to excommunicate members who had the wrong political views – what he considered the wrong political views. The next Sunday the pastor and nine members showed up with lawyers.

Another church, hoping to avoid anything that extreme, adopted conflict resolution guidelines based on this morning's lesson:

Step 1: Speak directly to the person you have a problem with

Step 2: If that doesn't work, go see the person with a couple of other members.

Step 3: If that still doesn't work, take it to the church council.

They actually printed those guidelines in the church bulletin. I can only imagine that first-time visitors must have thought they were walking into a war zone. If a church has to print a Geneva Convention for resolving conflict in its bulletin, things must be really bad. I wonder how many visitors came back next week.

But maybe that kind of blunt honesty isn't such a bad thing. A visitor with any kind of church experience would know that every church has disagreements and conflict and might even appreciate seeing a church acknowledging that right up front and giving its members some skills in how to deal with conflict.

Most of us aren't especially good at that and go out of our way to avoid conflict and confrontation. Just don't go as far as Dean Craig, who had a couple of unwanted house guests he couldn't get rid of. He asked them to leave and they refused. So he doused the floor with alcohol, threw a match on it, and

burned the house down. Nobody was hurt and Dean pleaded guilty to two counts of felony arson.

But let's back up. Jesus here is talking about behaviors that drive a wedge between church members, that create barriers, that cause estrangement. In other words, about behaviors that destroy community and the lengths to which we're expected to go in order to preserve community – a community where the members care about one another, care enough about one another to risk being honest, care enough about one another to tell the truth.

It's not about judging or one-upping a brother or sister. It's not about defending or justifying ourselves. Those behaviors destroy community.

The Greek word that's translated "church" is *ekklesia*, which literally means "called out." The church is called out of the world to be the body of Christ, the people of God. The church is called out to be an outpost of heaven and a sign of God's reign on earth.

That's why Jesus closes today's reading with the promise, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among you." Or as Eugene Peterson translates it, "When two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I'll be there."

I don't think he means that when a few of us get together to sing a couple of hymns and listen to a sermon and say prayer, that's all it takes. In this context he means two or three gathered in his spirit to risk a real relationship, to seek repentance, to offer and receive forgiveness. When we gather in that spirit, Jesus indeed is with us. When we gather in that spirit, we are the church.