

When I was in first grade, I had a problem. And his name was David. Desks were paired up around the classroom. His desk was paired up with mine. Every day out on the playground during recess, he'd punch me in the stomach. Hard. One day, I'd had enough. In tears, I approached Ms. Kinney, my teacher and told her what was happening. Her reply was simply, "That's because he likes you." Seriously. I demanded she move my desk away from his. And yes, I made a big scene. I didn't care if he liked me, I certainly didn't like him and it was wrong. Love never harms.

School never was a very safe place in my experience. I was teased and bullied, beat up, physically attacked and sexually abused. While serving eight years in the military there were situations where I endured similar hostilities. Church was the one place I always felt safe, until I discovered otherwise. But my experience pales by comparison to horror stories of other more vulnerable populations. And I note with sadness and anger, that too many stories keep surfacing with the common denominator that the ones we are supposed to protect are often the target.

I find it interesting, that even though the Church is a microcosm of society, there seems to be misplaced idealism; an unsubstantiated claim that somehow, we're above it all, we're supposed to be perfect in all things, always ready to forgive, always generous beyond measure, always perfectly, morally scrupulous! But if that's the case, then what need do we have of Jesus? Today's gospel reading suggests that followers of Jesus have just as many issues, miscommunications, need of forgiveness as the general population.

His disciples are given a step by step method, moving from a least invasive, gentlest approach that culminates with the greatest level of seriousness and authority – which works pretty well for a hierarchal institution such as our Episcopal 'branch' of the Anglican tradition! It's a classic chain-of-command way of resolving difference, for which my military service trained me well.

So when we get to the point that nothing has worked, all of our efforts to 'solve the problem' has yielded no fruit, the final answer is "let that person be to you as a Gentile or tax collector!"

As noted by Tom Ward during Breakfast Bible Study, ironically, the author writing this gospel is Matthew, the tax collector called away from his money extorting booth, by the one and only Lord Jesus himself! The gospels are brimming with tales of Gentiles and tax-collector 'types' being spiritually resuscitated by Jesus.

He didn't come to save the righteous, meaning the ones already 'right' with God. No, fortunately for us, he came to heal the sin-sick and wounded, including us 'sitting in the pews' or in the latest version, sitting in our cars at the YMCA camp parking lot.

We hear once again in Matthew that unsettling line, about binding and loosing. From my own experience within the church of leaving a smoldering volcano to smolder, with only mild efforts to relieve the pressure, it only builds until it erupts. And I believe that so much of our hostilities in our society is a result of leaving volcanos to smolder. Jesus wants us to employ the direct approach. Get in there, get under it, deal with it. But whatever one does, don't leave unresolved difference festering.

I was left reeling from the shock of the eruption, and no longer feeling safe in my sanctuary, so I left, in the middle of discernment no less (and there's that not-quite-so-equal and opposite reaction, again). I retreated to the cathedral of green and trails on a 4 month-long sabbatical of arduous hiking, praying and listening to God's whispers.

It might have been the end of church for me. A first attempt at a mediated meeting fell short, fueling my sense of betrayal and anger. But I became aware that God wasn't going to give up on this fractured body. And I'm not just referring to myself or the other party. An erupting volcano impacts the whole body, all the people. (You could say that I personally know this process of resolving difference quite well, I've firsthand knowledge!) Then I was invited by my priest to discover the healing power of the rite of reconciliation.

Many of us are surprised to learn that there even is such a thing in the Episcopal Church. It's right there in the BCP, starting on 447. We both agreed to come to the table and try again. In that process we found a lasting, albeit tenuous relationship.

Wouldn't it be amazing if we could take what we learn from scripture about resolving difference, and apply it to the deep divides all around us? It's not that we're perfect or have it all right, or have all the answers. It's really more like church is a lab, an experiment in love. And then we're nudged by Jesus to try to replicate what we do in church in the 'real' world because the 'real' world is the church too.

Keeping the body of Christ intact and healthy is a process. The same people who come through the doors of Church are the same people who go back out through the doors again into lives that may be filled with pain and suffering. Behind the metaphorical red door, we're no different from non-believers in that sometimes we do wrong and we are wronged.

Sometimes it's real and at other times it's perceived as real. But either way, the impact is real. Sometimes, the strike comes without warning; a heart-shattering volcano that has laid dormant for too long. At other times, it's subtle and insistent, like a dull headache.

The question is not whether we will sin against another, which means a sin against God. The more accurate question is how will we respond? Is the offender deemed 'not worth it' and so the relationship is allowed to crash and burn? Do we take the avoidance route, sweep it under the rug, out of sight out of mind?

But when happens when we reach the breaking point, the worst-case scenario – the deciding moment, when the jurist within feels confident that all steps have been taken and the non-compliant sinner has rejected all efforts, therefore earning the dubious title of Gentile or tax collector? (v.17) We realize that that's not the end of the story!

Because upon closer examination, we remember, wait a minute, who did Jesus sit at table with? That's right. He ate with sinners, outcasts, tax collectors, notorious and questionable characters, and unbelievers, yes Gentiles too. What is implied then? Maybe the best way to remove the thorn from my side is to get to know that someone, sit down and share a meal! Talk and listen. Hint, it may take more than one dinner. Just saying.

And as a faith community, we work through things together, supporting each other, holding one another accountable for our slips and slides. That's the process of slowing down to figure out our bearings, to see where we need to adjust our internal compass, determining if a line has been crossed and if we are way off course, deciding if the turbulence is leading us into doing more harm than good to the body of the beloved. Love never harms.

When we are gathered in His Name, even just two or three of us, the Spirit pervades, sometimes invades if necessary, and guides us into the healing and reconciliation process. Jesus is the centerline of our thinking and subsequent action.

The body of Christ can discern positive ethical choices more readily than an individual attempting to sail solo. The risk is much greater when we try to fix things all on our own. That is not how the ekklesia, the members of Christ's body functions.

Further, if we read v. 15 without the phrase "against you" which according to scholars is an 'add-in' the potential for disaster increases exponentially. Why? Because then we are liable to make broad judgments about sin and against other Christians. Blanket generalizations can cause great harm. Maybe that is why Matthew's gospel keeps it personal.

St. Paul avers in Romans that "Love does no wrong to a neighbor." V. 10 And he reiterates Jesus' teaching of the summary of the Law, to "Love your neighbor as yourself." V.9

There are many obligations that we meet, that we can put the check mark in the box next to it and say 'done' whether they be taxes, or civic duties, familial responsibilities, etc. But we will always owe love to self and neighbor. Reconciling love is the ONLY debt from which we are never free. We owe it to ourselves and each other to love. No harm done.

Amma Susan