

Calling in the Lawyers

A sermon on 1 Corinthians 6:1-11 & Matthew 4:18-25 by Nathan Nettleton, 19 January 2020

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Message

Godly love and respect doesn't prevent disagreements in the church community, but it should enable us to address them without having to call in the lawyers.

Sermon

In tonight's gospel reading, we heard a story that could be said to describe the birth of the Church. Some people reckon the birth took place at the first Pentecost after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, but if the Church is a community of people following Jesus together, then the calling of his first disciples would seem to be the beginning.

I mainly want to focus tonight on one of our other readings, the one from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians which focussed on the question of sorting out disputes and disagreements in the Church, but it strikes me that the stories of the calling together of the first disciples tell us a lot about the inevitability of disputes and disagreements that would need sorting out in the church.

It's not so apparent in tonight's extract. We only heard the calling of the first four, and all four were fishermen. If you've spent much time with fishermen, you'll know that they can be an argumentative bunch, especially when comparing stories of the size of their biggest catch, but at least these guys had already learned to get along with one another well enough to spend long days and nights on a small boat together without killing each other. They had worked out how to cope with each other.

But next week we will hear of Jesus calling a tax collector named Matthew to join his group of followers, and before long he also called a bloke called Simon – not Simon the fisherman, but another Simon who was a member of a feared patriotic terrorist group called the Zealots. Because Matthew was collecting taxes for the Roman occupation forces, he was despised as a collaborator and was exactly the sort of person that the Zealots would target, usually with a knife between the ribs in a busy crowd. So when Jesus calls both Matthew and Simon to join his group and follow him together, it's a bit like calling a militant transgender muslim and a member of the United Patriots Front and asking them to sit together on the bus and become buddies. It's not going to go smoothly.

Matthew and Simon may be the most extreme example of this in Jesus's original group, but they do not represent the exception. They represent the rule. Jesus and the Apostles speak regularly about the gospel as being “the gospel of reconciliation”, that that's because reconciliation between people who would otherwise be divided and at war with one another is at the heart of Jesus's mission and therefore of the reason-for-being of the Church.

There are churches today that utilise a church growth strategy called the “homogeneity principle” which says that each church should target a very specific demographic and seek to draw the majority of its people from that demographic because people like hanging out with other people who are a lot like them, and therefore they are more likely to turn up to church regularly if most of the other people there are their kind of people.

Now I'm not going to reject that principle entirely, because I accept that when a group of people don't speak the language of the dominant culture around them, they are probably going to need to meet for worship in their own language group, and I accept that when a group such as the LGBT+ community has been refused welcome in the mainline churches, they will probably need to form their own churches until the tide turns, as it is now doing. So I understand that sometimes creating churches around shared similarities is necessary for a while, but it seems to me that if it is promoted as the normal approach, it is in fact a betrayal of the fundamental nature of the gospel as a call to reconciliation across everything that would divide us.

Church congregations should feel kind of odd and awkward, because they should have lots of people in them who are nothing like you and who seem different and difficult and annoying, and who you need to work hard to understand, appreciate and get along with. If the biggest things that we differ on here are our preferences for which hipster cafe does the best soy latte, then we've probably missed the point of the kind of community Jesus has called us to be. We are probably not doing much of the hard work of real reconciliation where it really matters.

Did you hear the description at the end of our gospel reading of the kinds of people who came flocking to Jesus as his fame began to spread? It said that people came to him from everywhere, bringing all who were suffering from every kind of sickness: mental, emotional, physical or demonic. If you're drawing a crowd of the mentally ill, emotionally broken, physically sick or disabled, and the demonically tormented, you're not going to have an easy and naturally cohesive congregation. But if our churches are not drawing the sorts of people that Jesus was drawing, are we really following in his footsteps?

If we are serious about doing the work of reconciliation, and becoming people who are really proficient in the art of reconciliation, then we ought to be grateful for the presence of the difficult and challenging people, the people we find it hard to understand and get along with, because they are the people who are giving us the opportunity to identify the parts of ourselves that are not yet cooperating with the gospel call to love, mercy and reconciliation. They are the people who are giving us the opportunity to learn and grow and become more like the people that Jesus has called us to be.

So in the reading we heard from the Apostle Paul, he was expressing his outrage at the news that some of the Corinthian Christians had ended up taking their disputes with one another to court, to the secular law courts. And one of the things to note about this is that Paul is not objecting to the fact that they have disputes and disagreements. That's a given. His objection is to their failure to work the disputes through to reconciliation within the church community.

His objection is twofold. Firstly, he regards it as an outrageous failure that they would not have people in the church who were wise enough and sufficiently experienced at conflict resolution and reconciliation that they could help other church members sort out their disputes. And secondly, he regards it as a failure of love and mercy that, even if they can't sort it out in the church, that they would resort to the costly and hostile path of calling in the lawyers instead of just sucking it up and turning the other cheek.

Paul explains the first one by appealing to a common belief that there would be a coming day of judgement on which God's people would be the ones sitting in judgement on the rest of the world. But you don't have to buy into that image to understand the point he is making

about the church. He's saying that if reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel, then the church should have plenty of people who have become really good at conflict resolution and who would make excellent mediators when other Christians are in dispute. If this isn't one of our strengths, as a group, then what sort of gospel community do we think we are?

Paul's second grounds for objection – that of calling in the lawyers – is something that needs some careful conversation in our rather different day and age. Today's legal system, while far from perfect, has been far more shaped by centuries of Christian reflection on the nature of justice and the need to protect the vulnerable than the courts of the first century Roman empire. So things have changed, but that doesn't change the fact that our churches should be good enough at mediation and conflict resolution not to need to go down that path.

But what are we to make of Paul's anti law courts position in light of the recent Royal Commission findings into abuse and cover-up of abuse perpetrated by church hierarchies? I mean, the Royal Commission itself is a secular court, and one of its major findings is that churches cannot be trusted to properly investigate and deal with corruption and abuse in-house. Church organisations repeatedly claimed to be sorting these things out appropriately through their own internal mechanisms, and the findings were that these were usually a disastrous failure. So what would the Apostle have to say?

Well, firstly, not only have the courts changed since Paul's day, but so have the churches. Back then, the churches were fledgling local gatherings of believers, and there was no significant organisational structure binding them together. There were no major denominational structures with wealth and property and influence and reputation to protect. Wealth and power breed corruption, and church hierarchies are far from immune.

So I suspect that the Apostle Paul would recognise that while his words in this passage might still be perfectly applicable to a dispute between two church members of roughly equal status and power, the grossly unequal situation of a church hierarchy closing ranks and trying to silence a vulnerable victim of horrendous abuse is an entirely different situation.

There is still a role for in-house investigation and action too, and one of the things that has improved greatly in recent years in most church denominations is the policing of ethical standards for pastors and employees, and the formalising of complaints and appeals procedures for when abuses occur. So, for example, if any of you were to have a genuine complaint against me, if you either can't take it to our [Host Group](#) or you've tried without satisfaction, then on the ["duty of care" page on our church website](#), you will find contact details for the Baptist Union's professional standards worker who can convene a panel with the powers to investigate and hold a hearing and, if need be, either stand me down or hand me over to the police or both.

Those kind of structures were not in place when Paul wrote. Had they been, they probably would have pleased him because they are an example of what he was calling for, and that was for the church to develop the ability to deal with disputes itself. But I have no doubt that he would also recognise the frequent need to have an external judge when the church hierarchies themselves are part of the dispute, and so can't investigate themselves, or when genuinely criminal abuse is involved.

The findings of the Royal Commission, though confronting and humbling, have actually been a gift from God to the churches, calling them deal with the corruption in their ranks and return to their true calling, to be the pace-setters in balancing justice and mercy in a community of healing and reconciliation. And as I've already suggested, at the local congregational level, that begins not with formal structures and procedures, but with a welcoming of diversity, a commitment to extending care to everyone, and a passion for dealing with all the little things that might divide us, however hard it might sometimes be, so that we can be reconciled across everything that would seek to divide us. That's the heart of the gospel, and it's to that life of reconciliation and peace-making that Jesus has called us to follow.