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By Jude Thompson

## Introduction

In our passage this week Jesus confronts the issue of conflict head on. As we read through the text it might be easy to imagine ourselves as the wronged party, with right on our side, in search of acknowledgement or redress. Isn't this how we all tend to engage when we find ourselves in conflict? As you read through the text try to bear this fact in mind. Perhaps take a moment to imagine this scenario from the perspective of the other party in this dispute. In imagining such an interaction, put yourself in the shoes of the other, who probably also deeply believe their position to be right. Haven't we all found ourselves in this situation?

As you take a moment to read through the passage from the other perspective, try to reflect on these questions:

- How would you want to be treated in this situation?
  - How do we hear challenge and engage with those with whom we disagree?
  - How have we seen conflict within the church dealt with in the past?
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## Text

"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.

But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'

If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

"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.

"Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

## Comment

How do we deal with fundamental disagreements with those whom we should be in relationship with, particularly within the church itself? This question forms the core of Jesus' teaching in this passage. It is important to note that when Jesus is referring to the church here it is simply as a small body of believers: in an earlier passage Jesus looks ahead and tells Peter, he will be the rock on which he will build his church (Matthew 16, but the concept of the church at this stage was a relatively small and informal gathering of people. The church was built upon deep relationships between a small group of people. In this context Jesus lays out the procedure for dealing with conflict, and within these guidelines are beautiful values highlighting the importance of how we hold each other when these challenges arise.

This model of dealing with issues within church (what may we may now refer to as a model for mediation) is premised around an understanding of the centrality of the intimacy of relationship. Falling into disagreement with a 'brother or sister' is a deeply intimate thing. This depth of relationship can cause the schism of conflict to resonate that much deeper. Jesus therefore explores a deeply personal way to deal with these difficult questions. The issue is tackled head on but in a private way, initially held just between two people, without gossip or spreading the story out beyond those involved. With the failure to find a resolution, the circle involved gradually widens, but at each stage the issue is contained and every attempt at fairness is established.

Implicit at each step, is the necessity for a deep sense of listening. Each attempt to find a resolution calls for a need to be heard. To not only hear other's opinions, but to deeply engage with their perspective, allowing it to challenge our own positions, beliefs and opinions. When we really engage with what is being said, the space is opened up to creatively imagine ourselves in the place of others. That creative imagination encourages us to question our own perspectives from another angle. This may not always lead to a change of heart (as in the text) but this central idea of how we should engage with each other is held throughout the story.

As we imagined the story from the perspective of the other, it might have been easy to feel pretty hard done by, to ask where forgiveness finds it's home in this story? On first reflection Jesus appears to encourage forgiveness, but only so far. Implying there are restrictions in how far we are called to forgive. Once our position is vindicated in a public setting, are we then justified to cut someone off?

By reflecting upon the experience of Jesus' disciples hearing this story, we may gain a deeper understanding that challenges this interpretation and gives an insight into how these words may have originally been heard. The disciple Matthew himself was a tax collector, and while the author of Matthew is not the same person, this calling of Matthew by Jesus forms a theme that resonates throughout his gospel. Jesus, so often referred to by the Pharisees as a 'friend to drunkards and tax collectors' (Matthew 9: 10), is continually shown to be just that. Someone who reached out to those so often written off, and excluded from society. It's therefore hard to imagine that when Jesus referred to ultimately treating someone as you would a 'pagan or a tax collector', particularly in the presence of his friend Matthew, that this meant ultimate exclusion and division. Over and over again Jesus reached out and showed hospitality to those who were written off by others. This is not to diminish the issue, and Jesus was certainly never one to hold fire in calling attention to the challenges sin and dealing with people's behaviour. However the challenge to continue to show hospitality in how we treat those who we disagree with remains, to see them as people to be drawn back in rather than written off.

This passage finishes beautifully with the reminder that in situations of sin and conflict, he promises to be there where people can find any point of agreement. I wonder if how we hold each other when these issues arise, with a deep sense of intimacy, listening and hospitality is at the core of what Jesus is saying here?

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## Response

The guidelines laid out for dealing with conflict by Jesus in this passage, are a deep challenge to how we live and work with each other. This week as you go about your daily life, try to consciously put these values into practice in your everyday interactions with others, even in the absence of conflict and disagreement. At the end of each day note down and reflect upon the opportunities you had to explore the values of deep listening, of imaging situations from the position of others, holding stories within the boundaries of those involved and the openness to always draw someone back in to relationship. At the end of the week take some time to share this experience with a friend, and use that space to reflect upon the challenges and opportunities of holding these values at the centre of your relationships this week.

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## Prayer

Oh God who meets us in our most intimate places,  
Who calls us to hold each other in love and care even as divisions seek to tear us apart,  
Be with us as we seek to listen, to engage and to respect each other's stories,  
May we always be ready to draw others back in,  
Just as you constantly draw us back to you.  
Amen

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Season: Ordinary time

Themes: