

**Where Two or Three Are Gathered in My Name (Eph. 4:1-6); Matthew 18:15-20**  
*Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church, Camden, UCC, August 18, 2024*

Ephesians 4:1-6:

*I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father-Mother of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*

Matthew 18:15-20:

*If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. 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. If that person 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. 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, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father-Mother in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."*

You know, I don't really mind confrontation – as long as someone else is having it! Maybe even just thinking about a confrontation makes us uncomfortable, physically, and emotionally. Something in us tightens up, our nervous system kicks in with stress signals and hormones whether we want it to or not - just even thinking about it. Last week's sermon focused on the saying from Ephesians: "Be angry but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger." (Copies are available). I mentioned then that I would focus today on our covenantal commitments and processes for dealing with conflicts.

The word 'confrontation' itself is very thoughtful and helpful when we consider its origins. It means to "front" each other, to come face to face with each other, to look at each other together. How else can we encounter each other authentically but to come face to face? Of course, this takes courage and trust, if we hope for more than a shouting match (which can happen). In and by itself, coming face to face can make all sorts of things possible – if we allow ourselves to learn who is facing us beyond our projections of who we think the other is.

I still recall an incident from a time when I served in another church when two deacons were at odds with each other. They had become frustrated because of disagreements, misunderstandings, and miscommunications about who would be responsible for certain tasks and how certain tasks should be done. These were not earth-shaking issues by any means, but they had both gotten under each other's skin. They had also both fallen into the trap of taking things personally that were never meant to be. When the tension was palpable in a meeting again, I asked each man separately afterwards if I could talk with them. Each was kindly willing to do so and subsequently committed to a three-way conversation together.

I still give them a ton of credit for being willing to sit together. We agreed on a process of listening. The idea was that one of them and I would have a conversation while the other committed to listening without interrupting. I would ask questions from a place of curiosity and non-judgment to better understand the intentions, interpretations, and contexts shaping their response and action. Then I would ask the person who had been listening to share with me what they had heard and if any new questions had emerged for yet deeper understanding.

Again, we tried to come from a place of curiosity and non-judgment. Then I would go back to the first person to ask what it was like to hear this conversation and if they felt heard, if we had missed anything or if they wanted to respond to a question. After that we heard the perspective of the second person and repeated the process.

I also asked each if they could share something that they really appreciated about the other and each was willing to do so. One praised the creativity of their fellow deacon, which was often on display in fellowship events, including talent shows. The other praised their counterpart's ability to problem-solve and see things through. They both affirmed that they could see that they had an equally deep desire to serve the church community.

We then turned to talking together about themes that had surfaced, what each wanted to say to the other directly, including an apology if so moved, and what commitments they wanted to make moving forward. They also shared a good laugh about the infamous church choir Christmas parties they both attended. We closed our time together with a prayer. Both said that it helped them to be in a purely listening position for a while because it allowed them to be less reactive and to understand better where the other had been coming from and what their intentions were. As much as we want to face each other directly and speak, there can also be creative ways of turning our perspective or vantage point to see the world through the eyes of the other. It's a bit like dancing the tango where you take sharp turns to face in the other direction.

These men were amazing in their willingness to live their own faith and commitment to being in community. The exchange went about as well as it could

have because each came with a desire to understand and find a way forward. They could have sabotaged the conversation by merely defending their position and trying to convince the other of how wrong they were. Once we dare to be open with each other and trust the Spirit to work within and through us good things can happen. We all said that the saying from the Gospel of Matthew had become more real and meaningful to us because of our time together: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

These two deacons modeled so many of aspirations we name in our own *Covenant of Right Relations*, crafted during our visioning process by Meg Thomas, Jinx Hufnagel and Maria Ryan and adopted by the congregation in April. The Covenant lists the kinds of things that get us into trouble. It also states positively what commitments can help us to act more faithfully which those deacons modeled. Let’s put the emphasis here and listen to some of them:

*“We listen to understand, deeply and compassionately. We encourage people to speak their truth without blaming, shaming, judging or competing with them when they do. We stay engaged with each other through difficult conversations. We speak only from our own experience and responses and do not presume to speak for others. We hold ourselves responsible for hearing all sides. We do the inner work required to show up, stay present and remain open-minded. We forgive ourselves and others. We acknowledge our own and others' imperfections. We remind others of the spark of divinity within them. We know that the feelings of others matter to the wellbeing of our entire community.”*

There are many other gems in our Covenant and there are copies available on the Mayflower Room table if you would like to read it again. What I described as the

process of listening between the two deacons is an example of what we would aim to do in our own church if the Covenant were breached by one or more members of our church. We know the importance of urging everyone to speak directly to each other. However, our process will also include the option to have one of the ministers assist in having the conversation from the start or if an initial attempt to talk directly was not fruitful. In parallel to the process described in the Gospel of Matthew, one can also take a next step if this round of having another witness does not suffice and include more people who can help to listen if both sides agree to it. There is also clarity that we will include the possibility of involving a trained mediator if all else fails. For all steps, we will recommend that concrete commitments are made for the future. I trust that we will have an opportunity to discuss a final proposal later this fall. Meanwhile, I appreciate everyone's willingness to become more familiar with the covenant and our own commitment to live it out in community.

Our Gospel passage spells out how much is at stake: "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." Tending well to our relationships in community carries high stakes since our actions can have complex and often unintended long-term consequences. We can bind each other in unresolved hurt and negativity or we can liberate each other into living more freely and hopefully.

In all this, we have the opportunity, as we heard from the Letter to the Ephesians, *"to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one*

*body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father-Mother of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”*

By being willing to humbly make every effort to maintain unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, we live out our calling as baptized children of God. We are all baptized into community and not just our individual relationship with God. The two deacons who had the courage to “make effort to maintain unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” lived out their baptismal commitment by showing up for each other and the church.

In the sacrament of baptism, we commit to following the way of Jesus, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and welcome God’s gifts of reconciliation and mercy. The times when working through conflict and seeking reconciliation are called for are potent examples of how the rubber of baptismal faith hits the road of life, love, and justice. We are so blessed today to witness Lilou’s daring willingness to become baptized and to follow in Jesus’ way. When we promise our love, support and care to Lilou as part of this sacrament, let us remember that we make this promise to everyone here as members of this church. May our way forward together continue to be blessed.