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In the name of our one God who gives us ears for hearing, hearts for caring, and bodies for working His will. Amen.

Is this gospel reading not perfect for us to hear right now? It speaks directly to conflict and how Jesus imagined that we might handle conflict. I think it's important to establish up front that this passage in Matthew does not suggest that conflict itself is bad or sinful. Instead, it suggests that conflict is something that we might expect to occur. It seems to me that whenever two or three people are gathered, the possibility of conflict exists just because we are human; just because we are individual humans who have each been formed by different tribal, family and community customs.

It occurs to me that perhaps the end of this reading has an enormous effect on its beginning. Let's hear the end of the reading again. "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 in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Now, scholars differ on precisely what Jesus meant when he referenced the acts of binding and loosing, but I think as readers of scripture and disciples of Christ we are called to consider what he meant; what he meant for us as individuals and as the living representatives of his body in this world.

Consider for a moment what you have bound in your own hearts. When I just recently experienced the death of my father, I realized that the gifts that he gave me just by being with him and knowing him are bound to me in my heart. They will be with me forever. That makes me wonder what gifts that Jesus gave me, and continues to give to each of us, that are bound in my heart and in our hearts forever. It makes me

wonder what gifts of Jesus we are giving to our children that will be bound in their hearts forever. That binding is critical in forming a Christian identity; the identity that all of us is called to assume if we hope to follow God's call on our lives. We are called to grow our faith into the full stature of Christ. All Christians everywhere are in some stage of that process; a process that works itself out over a lifetime of learning and accumulated experiences of service on behalf of our neighbors.

Conflicts occur when people along differing stages of that process understand God's call on us differently. We argue about things like interpretation of scripture and homosexuality. We argue about doctrine and appropriate use of liturgy. In Lexington, the Episcopal church there, Robert E. Lee Memorial Church, argues about it's name in light of the most recent fury over statues and monuments to Civil War heroes. These arguments have split individual churches, even denominations. These arguments can lead to extreme responses that do nothing to reconcile the underlying differences. How can we be better at working these things out?

We can start by taking seriously the words of Jesus at the first part of this passage from Matthew. Hear it again. "Jesus said, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, 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."

Jesus was giving us a sense of the steps to be taken in order to reconcile after we experience harsh differences. Now I don't think Jesus would mind if we didn't follow these steps to the letter, as long as we acted in faith by capturing the essence of

what he said. The word that stands out here is 'listen.' Listening is hard when the words that are said are words you do not want to hear. It is hard when they are words that you vehemently disagree with. But Jesus warned us that following him would be hard. It is our job as leaders of the church, my job as your pastor and priest, to do that hard work and to encourage you to do it, too. As Jesus says in this passage, sometimes it is easier to listen if a third party, a person or people removed from the emotion of the issue, helps to guide the reconciliation process. But none of it will work if either party to the dispute refuses to listen, *really listen*.

Jesus says, "If the member 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." Wait. Let such a one be to you as a *Gentile* or a *tax collector*? Weren't they the despised people in the Jewish community? Are we expected to expel the person who refuses to listen? Is the *church* the final arbiter of who is in and who is out?

I don't think so. Consider for a moment who is speaking these words. It is Jesus, God incarnate. Jesus showed us through his actions and ministry that no one is to be considered an outcast. Jesus spent time in community with Gentiles and tax collectors, among other people who were considered to be unsavory in Hebrew society. So how are we to treat people who will not listen to, will not *really hear*, our perspective? Jesus wants us to love them - even as we continue to learn and grow in our faith; even as we continue to move forward according to our own discernment of God's will.

The last part of this gospel reading lets us know that whenever we gather with those whose views differ from our own, if we are gathered in the name of Christ he will be there to guide us; to help direct our conversation, to help reconcile us, to help bind both of us to Him.

While we are binding God to ourselves, we need to be careful to loose all those things that we do not wish to be bound to us - things like anger, and envy, and greed and selfishness. If we invite Christ into that process of letting go, He will help to loose those emotions from our hearts. Be especially aware today as we pray our prayer of confession that in saying those words, in digesting those words, we are loosing and unbinding our sins from us.

My friends, let us be intentional about what we are binding to ourselves, not only individually, but together in this community. Let us bind ourselves to Christ today. Let us bind to Christ in the Holy Eucharist, in worship, in fellowship and in service to our neighbors together. For when two or three are gathered, Christ *will* be in it with us.