“Bind Us Together”
Matthew 18:15-20

“Talk less. Smile more.”

This line from the musical *Hamilton* is a word of advice from Aaron Burr to Alexander Hamilton. “Don’t let them know what you’re against or what you’re for,” Burr continues. Many of us know how that story played out. Hamilton did not take Burr’s advice and was not well versed in avoiding conflict. "Talk less, smile more" is one of many useful tactics for *avoiding* conflict, for peacekeeping, but what do we lose when we merely exist to maintain peaceful waters? Instead of urging us to avoid conflict, the text this morning challenges us to consider each individual as a valuable part of the community when conflicts arise. This text empowers us all to speak up, challenges us all to listen, to listen again, and again, and promises that in the mess of conflict, God is present.

The irony is not lost on me that I am preaching a sermon on what binds us together for a congregation that I have not had the chance to traditionally bond with. Make no mistake, I have been met with overwhelming hospitality and kindness. But, as I was preparing preach this very complex text on conflict when we are physically divided to protect ourselves from a seemingly invisible enemy of a global pandemic, I had to wonder—can I really speak hard truths in great love to this congregation that I barely know?

I’m eager to know, Wilshire. Who makes the caramel cakes? Who always has pockets full of peppermints on Sunday morning? Who knows how to make the babies stop crying? Whose laugh sounds like music, and whose singing sounds like geese? I want to know whose hands carry handkerchiefs filled with years full of tears and prayers, and whose dutiful hands keep tabs on lists that keep things running. I don’t know yet what makes Wilshire laugh. I don’t know what makes you cry. How do you settle your scores?

If I had my way, we would always settle the score on the football field, and we would have
already had several moments around my dining room table enjoying homemade biscuits and freshly roasted coffee. Moments around a table are often what bind us together, but what happens when we are driven apart?

We begin here in Matthew 18:15 with a series of “if, then” situations centered around conflict. “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.” It should be noted that this is not necessarily a free pass for all members of the community to become the morality police. The sins here are personal—sins of the community, the sin of breaking a relationship, the sin of making anyone feel like they are not part of the kin-dom of God. And, unlike before, when those who were most marginalized were not heard, Jesus breaks down structures that were in place.

So often we hear, and we might truly believe, that everyone is welcome at the table. And while everyone might be welcome at the table, there are often unspoken roles and unheard voices. In this picture of community conflict, Jesus is asserting that everyone deserves to be heard.

Keeping the peace at the table has been a growing edge for me. In college, a new friend of mine invited a small group of us out to dinner with his parents who were in town. Having just recently come out to his friends, but not his family, he was nervous to have the two groups in mixed company.

On the way there, he instructed me to keep his newly outed sexuality a secret, because his parents would not understand or accept him. He continued by saying, that they will say things that I would not agree with. “Just keep the peace, we’re only here for dinner,” he said.

Knowing myself and my affinity for asking questions and “poking bears,” I asked him how he managed to make it through these dinners. “Just keep your mouth full,” he said. He assured me that we would have plenty in common with his parents because they were “church people.”

I laughed nervously, because “church people” never-ever-ever have conflicting ideas.
At the table, we shared laughs, and then the conversation quickly turned to controversial hot topics—who was “in” and who was “out” of the kin-dom of God. I looked at the genuine fear on my friend’s face when he was afraid that one of us would confront his parents about their comments and remembered his request. Just then, the waiter brought a basket of rolls, and I graciously kept my mouth full. I began to “Talk less. Smile more.”

On the way home, stuffed to my eyeballs with questions and dinner rolls, I asked him why he was afraid to speak up. “I don’t want to lose my family,” he said. In his family, he said, they kept the peace no matter who was hurting. That night has stayed with me when I think about the value of each and every community member’s voice. I often wonder what would have happened if my friend would have shared his hurt. I often wonder what would happen if more people knew that they had a voice.

It would be nice if a conflict was resolved as easily and quickly as it is started, but this text goes on to show what makes this so very human—conflict is messy. “If you are not listened to,” verse 16 follows, “take one or two others along with you so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”

In this moment, I see the role of the ally come alive. Friends, if you find yourself at the table but are unsure of your role, perhaps you are being called as someone who can bear witness to a truth that has been waiting to rise to the surface. I see in this moment the building of a movement, something we are seeing all around us.

Movements that began with one person saying “this is what has hurt me,” then gathering witnesses, then gathering more. There is a movement right now that started with individual names and is growing, calling for the church to notice, calling for us to listen. What started with the name Travyon Martin has grown into a movement of people crying out that their black lives matter. Tragically, the individual names continue to become a hashtag, begging people to listen to the fact that the sin of racism is still prevalent among us. Most recently, we’ve heard the names of Jacob Blake, Rayshard Brooks, Breonna
Taylor. The sin of racism that took these individuals from this world is being called out, and conflict has erupted. There is a movement underfoot, and the church is being called to bear witness to these stories and to listen when we are indicted in being complicit in communal sins like racism. But how can we listen so that we can repair what has been broken?

In a recent episode of Nadia Bolz Weber’s podcast, “The Confessional"\(^1\) she interviews Wilhelm Verwoerd, grandson of the South African prime minister from 1958-1966. Verwoerd speaks of coming to terms with being part of a system that hurt, and what happened when he learned to listen.

“What often would happen,” he recalled, “was that there was this kind of remarkable generosity of spirit, a willingness to say to me, listen, Wilhelm, we’re not asking you to reject your grandfather. In our culture, we respect our ancestors...use who you are to become part of the liberation of all of us.”

So what, then, do we do when we are faced with such hard truths?

\(^1\) https://nadiabolzweber.com/201-wilhelm-verwoerd/

If conflict resolution and reconciliation were easy and linear, I don’t think people would have taken the time to bother Jesus with it. We see in the beginning of this text that everyone has the freedom to voice their pain. Throughout the text we see a call for others to bear witness to pain. And time and again, we see that those who are being confronted are challenged to listen. Listen. Listen.

When they can’t listen, they get to go the way of the Gentiles and the tax collectors. Now, before everyone breathes a sigh of relief that the alleged “bad guy” has been dismissed like an unruly uncle from the Thanksgiving table, let’s remember that Jesus dined with Gentiles and tax collectors too. Leave it to the radical welcome of Jesus to throw a wrench in our carefully laid plans and agendas.

So, it seems as though there is no easy news in the text today, but there is good news. The good news is that God is in the midst of our messy conflict. We find God’s presence when we look into the faces of those in our community and we are
vulnerable enough to share our hurts and graceful enough to listen to where we have faltered.

I am eager to learn more about this community of faith. What I know about you already is that you have a history of finding ways to confront hard truths and conflicts while remembering what binds us together. Wilshire, you have a history of stepping into uncertain waters in order to make space for those who are crying out in pain and hurt, and you have confronted some of your own hard truths. You have been here before; you might remember that calm does not always mean peace and that every step in this process is painful, so we must continually focus on what binds us together.

Today, I wish we were physically gathered around this beautiful communion table. I wish we were together in this Sanctuary as our stomachs growled, and our children fidgeted, and our minds wandered. I imagine that what binds us together today might be the reality that we are physically apart right now—many of us feel lost and separated, longing for a sense of routine and normalcy.

As we gather in our sequestered sanctuaries today, I pray that what binds us together is the audacity to value genuine, messy community, for in its midst, we will find God.

Amen.