

There are so many different sermons in this one little gospel text that different ones of us need to hear.

Some of us need to learn to talk directly with those who trouble us, face to face rather than behind the back.

Others of us need to be reminded to expect conflict as part of real human, real Christian community, and to embrace it as opportunity rather than avoid it as threat.

Some of us need encouragement in the discipline of listening; others of us need to be prodded to speak up.

Some of us need fire and brimstone to burn away our evil habits of gossip and secondhand complaint.

Others of us need a light under our backside to speak the hard word to someone we know and maybe even someone we like, a word of truth offered in love.

Some of us need to learn how and when and what to bind; others of us need to learn how to loose and let go.

Some of us need to remember that Gentiles and tax collectors are among those outside our circle but in our concern, part of the mission field into which we are all sent with God's reconciling love, those whom God expects us to pursue with determined grace.

Others of us need to hear that Christ's presence and God's yeses to our prayers are promised only in the plural, to Christians who ask and agree together, not individuals bringing lists of requests like kids mailing letters to Santa Claus.

May God's Spirit speak to each of us the hard and healing word we most need to hear, even if God has to send someone else in the community to share it because we were gone for Labor Day, or the summer, or our season of detachment from that disappointing nest of hypocrites, holier-than-thous, divas, darlings, friends, frauds and flakes at Resurrection.

I have every confidence God that will reach us.

Even though it sounds more like a church constitution or H.R. manual than anything we'd actually want to read, there's a reason we celebrate this text as gospel, as good news.

Today's lesson, How to Handle Christian Conflict 101, is paired with a reading from Ezekiel in which God sends the prophet to plead with the wayward house of Israel to turn away from its sin and live.

It is in a way a mirror image of the gospel, with an individual chasing after a community.

In each case, there is sin, brokenness, wickedness, whatever you want to name it, the poison that replaces Godly health in the community with self-centeredness and spite.

It is powerful and pervasive and endlessly prevalent enough that we constantly need help with it: prophets and procedures, reminders and rules.

Yet these things feel rather like band-aids for cancer: they may be helpful supports, but they fall woefully short as strategies for overcoming the deep disease in the human condition.

We need more than good intentions and good ideas.

We need Natalie Evalynn Fleisch.

Who is she, a consultant?

Maybe she will be, someday, hopefully today.

Natalie is the baby who will be baptized this morning.

She is the child that Jesus sets into our midst this day.

Today's gospel text is actually midway through Jesus' lesson in Matthew 18; we walked in late to the lecture.

It began with the disciples asking *Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?* and waiting eagerly for Messiah.com to list his current power rankings.

But Jesus did then with them exactly what he does again with us this morning.

*He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

*Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.*

Jesus keeps sending us children for baptism.

Maybe eventually we will start paying attention to them and learning from them.

Maybe we as a community of striving, busy, earnest, greedy, over-reaching, over-confident, over-stimulated, overwhelmed adults will realize that all our striving and struggling, all our priorities and policies and procedures will never save us, that they will only leave us disappointed, disillusioned, exhausted, exasperated, and dead.

Watch Natalie.

She lets people hold her, feed her, baptize her, pass her around like bread at the table, not unlike Jesus himself.

She receives the gift of God's kingdom, a whole new and different way of life, as the center of loving attention who somehow brought more people to worship today than you did.

There is much we can learn from her.

And of course there is much she can learn from us.

We promise to be there for her as she grows up, and her parents and godparents promise to bring her here, and we hear each other say it, and we can and should hold one another accountable to delivering on these beautiful promises, even if we have to go through several procedural steps to do it.

All of this is because of God's rigorous and relentless commitment to us, God's fierce and faithful love that continues sending prophets to heed and next steps to try and new children to baptize until we finally open our fists and unclench our hearts and receive the kingdom we cannot achieve or administer on our own.

God keeps after us and keeps after us, even when we are gone for the extended holiday weekend or the extended rift with the faith community that we feel somehow failed us.

The verses just before our gospel text, the part of Jesus' lecture just before we walked in that sets up today's instructions on conflict resolution, is the parable of the shepherd of a hundred sheep who goes after one that is lost and savors indescribable joy in finding it.

This is the good news that we as sometimes wayward individuals want to hear, and also the good news that we as a sometimes wayward community need to hear.

Every sheep is important, and the community is more important still.

God's blessing and presence are not assured in the singular; beware, Natalie, that there are no promises for you if you try to go it alone.

That is why we baptize you on Sunday morning, in community, surrounded by saints and sinners, anyone and everyone we can find.

That is why we work so hard, or should, to reconcile when there is wrong: we need each other.

Life is hard, and it ends badly.

And when it does, once again God will find you.

Jesus will call you and set you in the midst of his disciples who have learned how to welcome you.

And you will be surrounded by cheering faces brimming with smiles and with song, the center of celebration in the kingdom of heaven, the reason for indescribable joy.