I wish I had consulted these words of Jesus when I faced a touchy issue about ten years ago. I had a bead and jewelry store in Blacksburg and, over the course of a few years, had developed some loyal customers. One of the main functions of the business was to teach people how to make jewelry and to sell them the materials to make necklaces and earrings for themselves. I had a table in the middle of the store where customers (almost all of them women) would sit and work on their projects, sometimes for hours at a time. The table then became not just a place to learn how to string and crimp but a place to gather and find community, the same way an old fashioned barber shop or country store used to function.

Things hummed along nicely until someone I'll call Jane showed up. Jane was profoundly handicapped and couldn't drive. She spent most of her time alone in her apartment so when Jane found the store, she discovered a social outlet, where she could meet people and learn a new hobby. When she came to the store, her ride usually couldn't make its way back for several hours, so Jane would essentially camp out at the store for that time.

Once or twice a week, Jane showed up and before I knew it, she was taking over the shop. She brought food and spread it out on the table, taking up space other customers might use. Jane required a lot of help and sometimes took me away from others in the store. Soon, the disagreeable side of Jane revealed itself. She would criticize the choices of other women and make fun of the jewelry they created. I soon learned that her favorite word for just about everyone was “moron.” Some customers thought she was using that word to describe them. She was.

Customers started complaining about Jane. They didn't like being around her, didn't care for her criticism and negativity. Sometimes, she smelled bad . These paying customers didn't want to say anything to Jane themselves but wanted me to handle it, to bring back that sense of community they enjoyed pre-Jane. I talked to Jane about it a couple of times, but she believed it was her right to come to the store; she said anyone who didn't like it was a moron. Soon, I began to worry when my paying customers didn't stay when Jane was there and I began to see that the business was suffering financially because of Jane's presence.

So, after several months of the tension and numerous phone calls to Jane, I asked her not to come back to the store. She didn't understand; she seemed not to know how her presence affected people and honestly didn't seem to care. Looking back, I think Jane had developmental issues that prevented her from understanding what was going on. I felt awful; I still do, for I believe I could have found another solution to the problem. I cut Jane off from the refuge she found in the store. I was a pastor, for heaven's sake, and had the skills to do things differently. To be honest, I took the easy way out for the sake of the business and I wish I could go back and change how I reacted to Jane and failed her. Of course, my store wasn't a church, but I understood that some women found sanctuary around the store's table and the sense of community they created with one another was one they did not find anywhere else. Instead of finding a way to expand the community to include someone who was challenging like Jane, we cut off the one who needed community the most.

I think Jesus was warning those in the early church about this very thing. Jesus knew that a community of faith would form around the events of his crucifixion and resurrection and he knew how hard it would be for his followers to hold that community together in the face of conflict within it and opposition from outside. So Jesus gave the church a formula to follow when the inevitability of dispute arose. There are a couple if ways to read Jesus' instructions. One is as a protocol for dismissal similar to that which a business would follow. That way, all the steps could be documented, all the paperwork could be filed and a person could be removed without fear of reprisal. That model makes perfect sense to just about all of us.

But there is another way to consider Jesus' instructions. Jesus could be talking about all the ways the community of faith should try to keep someone who has been disruptive within the community, the progression of Jesus' words suggesting that all the resources of the community should be dispatched to resolve conflict. If someone has done wrong, the wronged person can go to the offender and see if the two can fix the problem. If not, the wronged person takes more people with him or her until a solution is found. If one is not found, Jesus says the community can consider the offender to be like a Gentile or a tax collector. That would appear to be the ultimate judgment in Jesus' day, for the church was not responsible for Gentiles, who didn't share their faith. The ways in which tax collectors did their work were seen as unacceptable to just about everyone. Treating someone like a Gentile or a tax collector would be sure to send that person packing. But remember how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors? He loved them, ate with them, hung out with them. Also, Jesus was speaking to his followers before his cruxifiction and resurrection and Matthew's gospel was directed at a post-resurrection church. It turns out the resurrection makes all the difference, for the risen Jesus' love is constantly moving outward to pull more and more people in, not to push them away.

In a post-resurrection world, there is no distinction in Jesus' heart between Jew and Gentile, no line drawn between Christian and Jew, Christian and Muslim, Christian and Hindu or Buddhist, no difference between black or white or brown, woman or man, straight or gay. Jesus has died and been raised so all have a place in this world and at his table. As it turns out, Jesus loves the tax collector as much as the preacher, the police officer as much as the criminal, the moron as much as the wise one. Jesus is the way to community and the glue that holds it together. Jesus is always swinging wide the door when we are tempted to huddle together and slam the it shut. Jesus is always reminding us that the church is not a place for perfect people, but is that place where God's perfection gives us abundant life. So, in such a place, we accept conflict as inevitable and its resolution as God's way of keeping the community of Christ vibrant and healthy. We take care that those in power do not overcome the weak, that whispered rumors don't lead to corrosive gossip, that Christ among us wills us to grow by extending his love and grace to everyone we meet, especially those who are hardest to love.

The truth is that the church is full of troublesome people. Each of us contains a hefty portion of Jane. When we recognize that, when we strive to work together to resolve our conflicts, to work and worship with those who agree with us and those who do not, we are a sign for the world of what God hopes for us all – that we be a light in the darkness and the flickering flame of a peace that not one of us could ever set alight on our own.

Amen.

*Pentecost 14A*

*September 10, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Matthew 18:15-20*