

Text: Matthew 18:15-20 NRSV

## Message: The Real Church

*Pastor Riva Tabelisma*

Please join me in prayer.

Hide me in your glory, gracious and loving God. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my redeemer and my refuge. Amen.

Today's passage is one of the very few passages in the scripture that talks about or addresses the church as a formal organization. It is interesting to see how Jesus made exact instructions on how to deal with the congregation. I wonder if Jesus has exact instructions on how to deal with church administration in the pandemic.

As I am reflecting on this passage, there are new perspectives that I have learned, which I would like to share with you. The first perspective that I learned is – the church as one body with many parts. We are part of this faith circle – Community UMC the physical and virtual circle, because we want to be part of it. There are members who have been here for a very long time – with the number of years being more than my actual age. In the many short conversations that I have had with people here, I have heard stories about how Community UMC has been a part of the lives of the people, from the time that they were younger people, to youth, to eventually being married in the sanctuary, having their offsprings baptized, and so on. In the many parts of a person's life – this sanctuary has been the venue. I have heard people say 'This is my church' many times – to be honest, I can't remember how many times anymore. In a way, it gives comfort to a youngish pastor on a first appointment because it means that the church and the members offer sustainability. For an outsider, this means that this congregation has what it takes to continue its life since 1907. As an organized congregation for a very long time, this reminds me that Community UMC is a functional organization. Like a human body that functions well, I would like to believe that Community UMC is composed of different parts that makes it functional.

We have heard many times how important it is for an organization like a congregation to be working while people function in different parts so that it survives and thrives. Because we have heard that message in the past, I won't preach about that anymore. What I would like to offer today is for us to look at as a body with many parts, let us also look at the perspective that in this body with many parts, other than thinking about the functions of the parts, let us also consider that these parts are all interdependent with each other. As in the human body, for those who have background in anatomy and physiology, or even who studied basic biology, we know that our body parts are interdependent with each other. According to the dictionary, interdependence means a state of being dependent – not very profound, right? But in simple terms, for me, interdependence means we need each other in order to survive, I depend on you, as much as you depend on me. However, I feel that this is easier said than done, especially in a society where individualism and self-sufficiency is deeply ingrained in the people. When I moved to the US in 2016, what I have learned is that the American society is grounded on individualism and self-sufficiency, which what makes a person survive and thrive. I will leave this for now and circle back later.

The second perspective that I have learned is that conflict is part our lives. In every place where two or more people are in one space/place/organization, it is more than likely that they will have a conflict. And this is normal. Each person has a distinct personality, and sooner or later, it will clash with another. Even for people who have been married and together for the longest time, there will still be conflict. We see conflict even in our own families, because even family members have different personalities. I personally believe that conflict is part of a healthy relationship. The only thing that makes conflict bad is when people who are involved in it ends up feeling resentment for each other because it is not resolved – and both parties harbored resentment and in some cases anger with each other. Naturally, there is conflict even in a congregation, and I know that Community UMC is not exempted in that. Surely, if not at present,

people in this congregation have had conflicts with each other – even with the pastors in different times. But more than the conflict, I think the most important thing that we need to aspire is to resolve the conflict within and among us. Today’s passage talks about how we should, as a congregation, handle conflicts among us, with one goal, and that is forgiveness. Forgiveness that reconciles the offender and the offended. Forgiveness that is rooted in moving forward into becoming an inclusive and loving circle where every person would find his/her place in the circle. In welcoming each other back, we acknowledge our differences and accept that we need to work with our differences. This passage may also be familiar because this is the basis of the material Rule of Christ, which is used for conflict resolution. In my understanding, Community UMC used it at one point, and we are supposed to do it again because I am a new pastor in this congregation. So hopefully, we can find the time to do it. But if we read through the material (Rule of Christ), conflict resolution should be allowing us to continue being who we are individually, embracing our differences, but working through it, so like a healthy human body, we will be able to function well, survive and thrive. And to be honest, I am excited how that will look like in Community UMC.

Let us now intersect both perspectives. Because of our differences, conflict is very much unavoidable, but it is up to us, how we can work together in our conflicts. And as we are resolving our conflicts, we need to realize that we do not need to be thinking, acting and functioning the same way. Much like in the human body, for sure there are conflicts in the different parts our body, but the most important thing about it is like the different parts of our body, it is working together, to keep us alive and healthy.

Allow me to circle back in my first point. As we are living in a society that dictates us to be individualistic and self-sufficient, the reality is we need each other, despite and in spite of our differences, for us to survive and thrive. We are in the midst of a pandemic, and we see every day how people around, whether we know them or not are suffering, not only because they are sick, but also because of the impact of the pandemic to the lives of people – losing their jobs and the ability to provide for their families, isolation because being together can be detrimental to others, closing our churches because it is not safe. And conflicts among us came up because we have different opinions on how to deal with the pandemic. But we need to understand that we are part of each other. We cannot survive without each other – we are interdependent with each other. There is an African concept called UBUNTU...in simple translation it means ‘I am because we are’, which means we are all connected with each other. In our context, we can say that this is why we need to take care of each other – because as we are taking care of each other, we are also taking care of ourselves. This is a two-directional relationship, it goes back and forth, and that flow of love and grace never ends.

As we gather in the virtual space where we will share God’s table, I would like to quote John Wesley, ‘Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.’ We come to this table bringing our differences, but we will all enjoy the meal before us, the bread of the new covenant and the cup of grace that flows of God’s love for all of us, because even with our differences, we are all invited and have a place at this table. And I think, that is how a real church looks like. When we, as children of God reflects the love, grace and mercy for the world. May it be so. Amen.