



## DECENTLY AND IN ORDER

September 10, 2017, The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 13: 8-10; Matthew 18: 15-20

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Theme: Institutions, though always imperfect, matter.

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*Immanent God, you promised that where two or three are gathered in your name, you are present. Here we are, gathered, well more than three. Open our eyes to your nearness and our ears to your word. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

Terri and I belong to a funky little yacht club near our summer cottage in Michigan. “Yacht club” are ambitious words – dues are minimal, the docks are treacherous; the whole thing slants perilously and just may slip into the lake someday. We really enjoy it, but not as much this summer.

The Pentwater Yacht Club had quite the summer brouhaha. Emails and letters flew around town. Petitions circulated. Meetings got hot. And it was all about the governance. A number of members deeply distrusted the club leadership. They wanted to alter the bylaws so that just about any important decision would have to be put to the vote of the entire membership. Happily, their *coup d'état* went down in flames. It would have been a disaster. Need to fix the rotting roof in the club's kitchen? Call a meeting of all 600 members!

I tell you this tale because it is a micro version of a pernicious macro reality in modern culture. We live in a time of deep cynicism about institutions and pervasive distrust of leadership. A recent Pew reports says that only 19% of Americans trust their government most of the time. Gallup recently polled Millennials about their trust of institutions. They're even more cynical. They totally distrust big business, the media and Congress. Their highest trust levels



(but they're still low) are in the military and small businesses. The police and the church tied for third on their trust scale.

America witnessed this cynicism about institutions in the recent presidential election. What's called "populism" is fundamentally a distrust in existing institutions. Bernie Sanders ran against the financial institutions we call Wall Street. Donald Trump ran against the institutions of the news media and Washington. But this attitude of institutional distrust is not that new. It goes back at least a half a century. In 1964, three-quarters of Americans said they trusted their government to do the right thing most of the time. By 1976, that number had dropped to a third. Now it's 19%. This epidemic of distrust has hit mainline churches like us Presbyterians hard. In the last 50 years, membership in the six largest Protestant denominations in this country has dropped by more than 25%.

In that passage Petra just read from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus creates an institutional structure. Let's say you've got a problem member at church. What to do? Jesus outlines a procedure – and *institutional* procedure – for resolution, simple as it is. First, talk to the problem member alone. If that doesn't work, try it with another witness or two. If that doesn't work, bring it to the church, either the congregation or the leadership, it's not clear. If that still doesn't solve the problem, Jesus says, "*such a one shall be to you as a Gentile or a tax-collector.*"

At first blush, this last step sounds draconian, like "kick 'em out of church!" But it's not what you think. Who were those Gentiles? Non-Jews of course, all those uncircumcised Greeks and Romans whom Jews had traditionally avoided. But here's the catch: the whole Gospel of Matthew is about *including* Gentiles in the Christian community! A central thrust of Matthew's Gospel is that Gentiles were now "in." And tax collectors? Everybody despised tax collectors as Roman lackeys out to line their pockets. But Matthew, the author of this Gospel, was *himself* a tax collector! And he was obviously "in."

Jesus' words about "let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" are a subversive double entendre. "You would *like* to shun them," Jesus' third step implies. "You'd like to treat them like you *once* treated Gentiles and tax



collectors, but now, even Gentiles and tax collectors are in.” The hint is that you may just have to live with nettlesome church members.

This passage from Matthew’s Gospel sees Jesus create a formal institutional structure to deal with a human problem. I find at least two clues relevant for today woven into this story. The first is simply this: *institutions really do matter*. They matter a whole lot. Governmental institutions matter. Good institutions are necessary the ordering of common life, for the running of a city and a country; they’re needful for economic growth.

Some years ago when I was visiting Haiti, I asked a local leader what Haiti needed to attract investment and lift itself out of poverty. His immediate answer surprised me. He said that Haiti had no reliable institutions to guarantee secure title to land. There was no institutional structure to assure buyers that they would really own what they thought they bought, so, he said, they don’t buy and they don’t come.

And church institutions matter. Every once and again, I’ll hear someone opine that though they’re quite spiritual, they don’t care for *institutional* religion, as if that adjective were a smear. I want to answer, “Well, your spirituality’s going to be a lonely religion of one. If you live out your faith in any kind of a community, you’ll eventually need some level of institution. Communities, including religious one, need structure, norms and rules; they need leadership in order to work. Otherwise they’ll inevitably slip into chaos.”

The second clue I find woven into Jesus’ prescription for a system of conflict resolution is this: *essential as they are, all institutions are imperfect*. In this passage from Matthew, it’s the First Century and there’s already a troublesome church member shaking things up.

I read a book this summer by the cultural historian Isaiah Berlin entitled *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. It’s a collection of essays deriding all the vain and dangerous attempts in history to build a heaven on earth. He especially goes after communism and fascism. The title of the book is the first half of a quote from Kant. The whole of Kant’s words were, “*Out of the crooked timber of humanity,*



*no straight thing was ever made.*” Humanity’s timber is indeed crooked. We are all of us “crooked timer.” (The traditional Christian name for this reality is “original sin.”) Kant’s point, Berlin’s point, is that because we are all *individually* flawed, the communities and institutions we build are also flawed.

So here we are..., two things are true: One, we really need institutions. Two, the institutions we so need are never even close to perfect.

Later in this service, two dozen of you in this room will be inducted into leadership as Elders, Deacons and Trustees of this venerable institution, the Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York. Understand two things clearly, though there’s one more thing I’ll save for the very end of this sermon. First, remember that this institution you’ll serve *really, really matters*. Second, remember that like all institutions, it’s not perfect and never will be.

Speaking of institutional structures, I can’t but mention the structure that’s in place to facilitate leadership transition after my retirement toward the end of the year. A Transition Team of excellent church leaders is in place and working away. The *Book of Order* of our denomination carefully plots how these transitions are to unfold. The Presbytery of New York City will be there to support and monitor. The institutional process and its rules will feel laborious at times. It’s not perfect, but it’s needful, and it generally works.

I said there would be one last point about institutions that I saved for last. This one isn’t true of all of them, but it’s true for *faith* institutions like our church. At the very end of Jesus’ prescription for institutional conflict resolution in this 18<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Matthew, he says, “*For wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them.*”

When we welcome new members into our church, I always give the same little speech. Part of it goes like this: “*The Christian faith is a pilgrimage, an adventurous journey... Please know that you do not undertake this journey alone. You will enjoy and be strengthened by the company of the faithful in this congregation and beyond. And in all of your life, in all that you do, you are*



*assured of the transforming, empowering, and loving presence of God. We as the church,” I ramble on, “are by no means perfect. Your church membership implies no new state of completion, rather it implies simply and clearly that you are wholeheartedly resolved to join in this journey.”*

The point is, actually the *three points are*:

One, institutions, the church especially, really matter.

Two, they’re never going to be perfect, the church included.

Three, as people of faith we’re not alone. You who are about to be ordained or installed are not alone in your impending work. Brick Church will not be alone in the time of transition before you. God is with you, among you, and will strengthen you for the journey.

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*