

Good morning, my brothers and sisters of the congregation named after St. James, /within the Diocese of California, /within the Episcopal Church... //I could go on and on with naming our identity as part of larger and larger units, all of which have their history—some might say, their baggage—but each of which is essential to our understandings of ourselves and our relationship to Jesus Christ. Together these all help us to identify ourselves within the category *Church*. But if we want to understand today's Gospel passage in its own terms, perhaps I should begin more simply: "My brothers and sisters in community under our Lord Jesus." For today we heard Matthew's directives to his **community** on how to deal with dissention within their **fellowship**. It is thinking on this scale of intimacy and immediacy that will help us understand what Matthew's message was to his own community.

When Matthew has Jesus talk of and to "the church," /he may not mean what we think of /when we identify that **historic institution** 2000 years later. But even in the time when his gospel is written, /the community, /or perhaps *assembly*,/ is recognized as having problems with its members / problems which, if left unaddressed, would **poison the sense of unity** so vital to their existence. Difficult

and troublesome members/ and the presence of factions within a church body
/were part of community life then /and continue to exist now.

Perhaps you have had an experience similar to what I had in Ann Arbor when I first arrived there in 1982. My visit to the nearby Episcopal parish included a fine, intellectual sermon within a very moving service, /accompanied by fantastic music by choir & organist. As I left the nave for the coffee hour, /which they held on the spacious front lawn during the summer, /I quickly noticed that there were small circles of people talking vigorously among themselves, /but with no intermingling. So, not knowing anyone at all, /I got a cup of coffee and stood outside one cabal after another. Each circle was a small faction so intent on its own anger and suspicious of the others /that I went entirely unnoticed /until I finished my drink and walked away home. I later discovered that the new rector's proposed programs had created reactions among groups entirely at odds with one another over a variety of issues. As I had perceived, /they did not talk to one another at all. A full year later, /when I ventured to show up again, /the parish had a new interim priest who presided over a noticeably smaller congregation. Such is the consequence of issues which Jesus reportedly addresses in today's Gospel.

The Church in **the first and in the 21st** centuries is full of human beings, /fallible humans with our own issues, prejudices, and blind spots. That is why this passage suggests a means of reconciliation with "problem" members which is

gentle, direct, /and yet intended to avoid public shaming (“first talk to the person alone, /one on one,/ and if need be, take one or two others to reason with him or her”). Only when these methods fail is the whole congregation involved, /so as to prevent this person from being lost entirely.

I have one note on terminology and interpretation: / Our NRSV translation says

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.

This attempt to be inclusive, I think,// backfires. The Greek reads “*your brother*,” emphasizing the sense in which belonging to the Christian assembly is a kind of kinship, /rising above ethnicity, /gender, and other identities; //inside the church community, /we recognize ourselves primarily to be called to be children of “our Father in heaven” (also mentioned emphatically in this passage). Furthermore, Jesus here is **not concerned with individuals righting the wrongs against themselves personally**, /but **with error** or “wandering,” /with behaviors of our brothers or sisters in the faith which can **harm the whole body** and compromise the community.

And here is the bottom line: /Matthew’s Jesus (I say this because these verses have no parallel in the other gospels) is giving instruction on how to deal

with certain conflicts which arise from people who have fallen into sin or error or poor judgment /and who need the correction of another Christian *for their good and the good of the community*. Despite some commentaries I have consulted, /I believe the goal of this action is not, ultimately, **to shun or excommunicate** the sinner in this passage,/ but to offer that person **the means to reintegrate** into the community /and for the community to avoid splits and division.

Just prior to this passage, for example,/ Jesus had told this parable:

If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

(Mt 18: 12-14)

I can't help but connect **leaving the larger herd behind** to search for the wandering sheep on one hand /to the directive given **to seek out and counsel—even rebuke**, if necessary— “your brother” /in order to “**regain**” him **within the fellowship of the community**. The **parable of reclaiming** sheds light on the purpose of **reconciling with others** /which Jesus directs his disciples to pursue.

If this process is **worked out to the end** and still fails, /I am not sure that we can **wash our hands** of our stubborn brothers or sisters who persist in their ways. Having **exhausted all attempts** to **correct** the sinner privately, /Matthew has Jesus **instruct his followers** to bring the matter before **the church**—/again, I would suggest we read *ekklesia* as “congregation,”/ “assembly,” /or “community” /in order to avoid the heavy institutional connotations of “church.” If even that **attempt at reconciliation** fails, Jesus says,

If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

The attempts to persuade and change the behavior of this problem child might not have, /but does Jesus really argue for **excommunication or ostracism** of that person? Some argue that this is necessary /because of the need to **maintain the integrity** of the community. But what kind of “**community**” is the **church** after all? Is it a body of the pure and righteous? Or is it made up of fallible human beings, each with his or her own history /through which lenses we all understand the world, /with various degrees of imperfection always present? Even after our baptism/ and continued active **living within the body** of the Church, /are we ever without sin? Or do we **ever** stand together **without the need for grace**? And if this is true,/ how do we **justify our own places** within the community of imperfect persons?

To interpret this passage, /we need **more than our own preferences** /and personal perspectives; //we need always also to read Scripture **in its own context**. We have already seen that/ just before our passage, /Jesus had given the parable of the Lost Sheep /in which the shepherd seeks it out,/ finds it,/ then **rejoices** that it has been returned to the fold. //Reading further on in the chapter, /what **immediately follows today's gospel** portion is **Peter's question** to Jesus about **forgiveness**—the flip side of reconciliation:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

(Mt 18:21-22)

As if to **highlight** the response even further, /Jesus then adds the parable of the “Unmerciful Servant” who **was forgiven an immense debt**, /but then turned around and refused to forgive someone who owed him a much smaller debt. //How then, /given the greater context of today's lesson, / how then can we understand the **failed process of reconciliation** it describes /as culminating only in **wasted effort** on the part of the assembly and **excommunication from the community** as the sinner's punishment?

Sandwiched between these two parables—the Lost Sheep and Unmerciful Servant—we need to revisit the meaning of the clause “*let him be to you as a Gentile and tax collector*”. In fact, I found an echo of my own thoughts in the way **Eugene H. Peterson** paraphrases this passage in his dynamic Scripture interpretation, *The Message*:

“If [the sinning fellow believer] still won’t listen, tell the church. If he won’t listen to the church, you’ll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God’s forgiving love.”

After all, /this is spoken by Jesus himself, /who was **repeatedly criticized** by the **righteous** of his day for **consorting with** sinners and tax collectors. As he shared table fellowship with the likes of these, he declared,

“I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.” (Lk 5:32)

Jesus is empowering **the members of his church** /to create a **community** worthy of his **Holy Name**. When he tells his disciples,

whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,

he bestows upon them the power **to build up the community** by **binding it** to his teachings /through his redeeming and sacrificial love. Their constant active

call to **reconcile other sinners** /is a call to “**bind**” them into the community / and to **keep the community “bound**” or cohesive in the face of forces which would **splinter** it. //When there is **sin or error** /which can **destroy the erring person** /and **compromise the community**, /they should use their **power to “loose,”** /that is, **to release a person from the power that sin** holds over him, /so that now free or “**loosed,**”/ that **redeemed one** can reintegrate into the **fullness of life** /in the **community** united in Christ.

Through their united prayers, /the community has the power **to forgive** and to offer new life to those who otherwise would **be lost**. /For that community which proclaims Christ’s holy name /is where Christ is present and lives continually. / The community **needs Christ** for its being. The community welcomes **all to life and reconciliation** to God in the name of Christ. And each one of us fallible, imperfect, and difficult “little ones” **needs** the community, its prayers, and its Spirit to live our new life in Christ among our brothers and sisters.