

06 September 2020: Matthew 18:15-20 (Proper 18)

Jesus calls us into union, not only with God but with one another, in and through Christ. We are not individuals choosing to associate; we are members of a Body, every member essential, every part responsible for and accountable to all other members of the Body.

Jesus uses the word *sin* for the fracturing of community: *If another member of the Church sins against you...* Mending relationships is integral to relationship with God. Jesus places responsibility for offering reconciliation on the one who believes they are the injured party: *If another member of the Church sins against you...* We assume the aggressor should make the first move; after all *they* are in the wrong? Jesus thinks reconciliation is more important than who is right and wrong. Perhaps he assumes that the person who does the wrong is already, in a sense, blinded by something that causes them to sin against the other. How can a blind person find the way? It is up to the one who recognizes the fracture in relationship to attempt to bring God's healing to the situation. This calls for maturity.

We have all received what we may rightly consider unfair, hurtful treatment from other Christians. While we may need time to reflect on what happened—we need not remain wounded. Wallowing in hurt or resentment gets us nowhere. We can become so accustomed to being aggrieved victims we come to feel justified in wounding others. Jesus calls us to end cycles of emotional and spiritual violence by giving up grudge and resentment to him.

In the kingdom of God, there *are* winners and losers, but the winners are not those who get their way no matter what, not those who rise up by putting others down, not those who terrorize or tyrannize. The winners are those who foster healthy relationships in Christ; the losers are wounded wounders building a little world of their own, a cramped, mean, unhappy, lonely little world.

In today's Gospel Jesus gives four steps toward reconciliation. First, when wronged, seek out the other privately. If the two are reconciled, all is well—as it should be. Healing between Christians should first be attempted privately: reconciliation, instead of gossip; private conversation instead of sulking; honest exchange in place of character assassination.

Second, if the rift cannot be healed privately, Jesus advises that one or two others make the attempt with you. He uses the term *witnesses*. This is not forming a 'gang' to overpower the person. "Witness" clearly means the helpers have personal, first-hand knowledge of the difficulty. Indeed, the witnesses may help you put the difficulty in perspective. Perhaps the problem is more about what is going on in you—some past un-reconciled wound the incident re-opens. Perhaps your hurt was unintended or misinterpreted, and your friends can help you see this. Again, the goal is not blaming or shaming, but reconciliation, with others' help.

The last two steps seem extreme: sharing the difficulty with the whole Church and treating the unrepentant as an outcast. Of course, sometimes others are aware of interpersonal difficulties, but second-hand through gossip. Gossip, by nature inaccurate and sensational, encourages aggrieved parties to defend themselves. Talking behind someone's back, enlisting others to share the grievance kills reconciliation. Jesus understands reconciliation as the responsibility of everyone in the Church. The question is, how can we who are not aggrieved, wisely and gently assist in reconciliation.

Now the fourth, ultimate step—shunning the one who wounds and is unrepentant. I think Jesus is saying that if someone acts as if they are a law unto themselves, that their opinions and pride trump love for one's brother or sister, that they are above the responsibilities of Christian charity, then allow them to experience the full impact of their delusion. The truth is no one can be *in* a community and *above* a community at the same time. There are times when we must simply choose: am I a member of the Church and therefore a servant to my brothers and sisters—or am I above Christ's love, God's plan of salvation, the Holy Spirit's power for conversion. The answer is obvious.

We do not seek spiritual perfection but spiritual progress. I try to remember this, especially when preparing sermons. With every word spoken I indict myself; I am a very imperfect practitioner of reconciliation. Spiritual progress is not by strenuous effort but by continuing surrender. We may all practice forgiveness and reconciliation, as we rely on the Holy Spirit to guide, strengthen and humble us. We cannot truly accept the reconciliation of God without also offering reconciliation to, and accepting it from, one another, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer. God loves all of us as one, and desires that all of us be one in Christ's reconciliation for all. This is our best witness to the power of God's love. Amen.