

Unity in the Community is the Lesson for Today

23rd Week Ordinary Time – Matthew 18:15-20

The gospel for this week needs a little background in order to understand its meaning. The evangelist, Matthew, is telling of Jesus' criteria for unity within the community. However, there are conditions to Jesus' standards that seem a bit harsh. To understand this text it might help if we look at the historical context in which this piece of scripture was written.

Matthew is writing, as a Jew or perhaps a converted Gentile, to a Christian community that no longer is associated with the local synagogue. He is addressing the fledging structure of the Christian Church perhaps 50 years after the death and resurrection of Christ.

Disharmony and conflict have arisen in this new community. Matthew is utilizing the teaching of Jesus to provide instruction to the current community on how they are to deal with conflict. The overall message of Jesus is that unity in the community is essential for the community to survive. But unity is not based on personal desire or wants. Unity within the Christian community must be based squarely on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone." These are wise words for a church, parish, family, or any relationship. Jesus is saying that conflict between two members of any organization or group affects everyone else. It effects how the group or community relates to the wider world. Jesus says that conflict should, if possible, be reconciled between the two so that the conflict is not public.

Jesus continues this lesson with an intensifying approach to protect and sustain unity. This lesson is in place to protect and honor the one who sins in such a way that he or she might return to the community with their dignity intact. **"If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector."**

At the time Matthew wrote this gospel, the idea that someone would return to the status of Gentile or tax collector once he or she had been converted to Christianity would have been the last resort. The member was still able to return to the communal life if they were to reconcile with the community, mend their ways and join in the discipline of Christian life.

This is true in the Church today. The Church does not excommunicate people unless it is something very, very severe. The Church today still upholds the importance of reconciling differences between parties as soon as possible. It is our responsibility, as Christians, to seek a means to restore unity within the social structures of our lives. The Church provides the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a means to reconcile our relationship with God, restoring unity within the community.

Blessings!


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