

Communities of Practice: Life Together

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Columbus, OH
February 9, 2025

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who know that the way we behave toward one another is the fullest expression of what we believe.

—from “Eight Points of Progressive Christianity,”

Ancient Witness: Matthew 18:15-18

[Jesus said] “If your sister or brother should commit some wrong against you, go and point out the error, but keep it between the two of you. If he or she listens to you, you have won a loved one back. If not, try again, but take one or two others with you, so that every case may stand on the word of two or three witnesses. If your sister or brother refuses to listen to them, refer the matter to the church. If she or he ignores even the church, then treat that sister or brother as you would a Gentile and a tax collector. The truth is, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will be released in heaven.”*

(*These regulations were developed by the ancient community after Jesus died, no doubt, in order to deal with divisive behavior. The most extreme response sounds quite severe unless we remember Jesus’ own view of tax collectors and Gentiles who were outside the worshiping community and yet loved and fully embraced by God. —SVK)

Friends, we are now entering some trying times as a nation. We’re sailing in choppy and chaotic waters. And we need our faith communities and our churches now more than ever, for support, for rest and grieving, for encouragement, for courage and action, for grounding us in God’s love. And Jesus often spoke about how to strengthen communities and how to live together as people of faith.

For example, Jesus said, “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” and he wasn’t saying was that we don’t evaluate or even challenge behavior of others when they hurt others. We still make ethical decisions. But the word “judge,” *krino* in the Greek, is more like “to pass judgment,” “to pass sentence” or “to condemn.” So it is more like “Do not condemn or you will be condemned.”

Now, this is very close to the meaning of that famous story told by John about the woman caught in adultery, when John’s Jesus says, “Let those without sin cast the first stone.” One by one the people drop their stones and leave. Then Jesus says, according to John, “neither do I *condemn* you.”

Much of Jesus’ ministry was countering people who thought they knew the Truth and who were going to be enforcers of the Truth, those who thought they were “without sin” and had perfect understanding, which gave them the right to stone others and condemn others and pass judgment upon others, including, sadly, even Jesus, himself. “Do not condemn; do not throw stones,” said Jesus.

Robert Fulgum in his classic book, *All I Ever Really Needed to Know*, said that what we really need to know is not really to be found in universities or the great institutions of higher learning, or with corporate think-tanks, or with governmental bureaucrats. All we need to know was taught to us in kindergarten as children.

*Share everything.
Play fair.
Don't hit people.
Put things back where you found them.
Clean up your own mess.
Don't take things that aren't yours.
Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
Wash your hands before you eat.
Flush.
Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
Live a balanced life—learn to think some
and draw and paint and sing and dance
and play and work every day some.
Take a nap every afternoon.
When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic,
hold hands, and stick together.
Be aware of wonder.*

All we really need to know is both simple and mysterious. And so it is with the church.

Now, that there is conflict in the church may disappoint us, but it certainly should not surprise us. This has disappointed many people, and there are those who have even left the church disillusioned with all the fighting and carrying on. The church, after all, is a human institution and is subject to the same weaknesses and shortcomings as any other human community.

Jesus preached to his community of followers as people who would have strong differences, as people who would constantly have to forgive each other. Not seven times but “seventy times seven.” The question for Jesus was not *if* the community would experience conflict within itself and with the world. But the question was for him *how would it deal with its conflict and anger*. Paul would later write to one of these communities: “Go ahead and be angry, but do not sin.” Jesus did not expect those who followed him to be inhuman or above the fray. But Jesus did hold up a standard for how to deal with feelings of anger and with conflict.

So the church is far from perfect, but there is something about the community of faith which can be (and sometimes is) a model to the rest of the world of how to deal with conflict. It is not a group which professes to be without sin or without anger or without fighting. But the congregation can demonstrate by example how to reconcile division and resolve disputes. The spiritual community can provide glimmers and rays of light in a world sometimes enveloped by darkness.

And as people of faith, sometimes *how* we say things, sometimes *how* we take a stand, is more important than *what* we say or *what* stand we take. Sometimes our most effective witness to the world around us is *how* we behave, how we treat each other, and the process of making decisions rather than the decisions themselves.

Today we have some basic principles about how followers of Jesus are to deal with differences among themselves. These principles were passed on to us from Matthew. He listed three steps for dealing with any kind of complaint against another person.

First, according to Jesus, one is to go immediately, directly and personally to the individual with whom one has a difference. We are not to hide, ignore or cover up our differences. (One exception would be a case of sexual abuse where the victim would obviously skip this first step.)

Notice that the person who feels wronged is to take the initiative. There is no room in this teaching for grudges or passive-aggressiveness like pouting. One cannot always avoid being a victim, but one can avoid the victim-mentality.

In the church we are responsible for building up one another as a church, and the concern is upon the spiritual well-being of the other. Notice a few things about how to initially deal with someone who has hurt us.

- 1.) It is done in private. “If another member wrongs you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.”
- 2.) The expression “win back” shows that what matters is the other. “If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.”
- 3.) The feelings are not either kept to oneself where they are stored up and fester, or they are not told to anyone else. I am responsible for my own anger, whenever I have it. “Do not let the sun go down on your anger,” Paul would write.

The goal is love, forgiveness and reconciliation; and that is what the followers of Jesus are about. Again, these are standards for the church, according to Jesus. They stand in contrast to the way of the world and may not apply outside the community of his followers.

Over 35 years ago I met with one of the ministers of a large, conservative church in Cincinnati because I admired how they handled conflict in their church. (Yes, I think we can learn things from conservative sisters and brothers.) He wrote:

We are committed to two related concepts—that of the “clean slate” principle and the “good report” principle. The essence of these agreements is that in the event of any feeling of hurt or animosity that we might have toward one or the other members of the staff, we will take immediate action steps to share the nature of our feelings and to resolve them with the person—that is, to “clean the slate.” Asking forgiveness is often a corollary to this principle. The “good report” principle indicates that I will not give or receive a bad report on any other member of the staff. If someone else approaches me with a bad report concerning a staff colleague, (or for that matter any other member of the body) I will immediately ask the person not to proceed with their report to me and call them to go to the individual involved and share their concern. I will further hold them accountable to do so. It would be hard to overstress the importance of the two principles. (Richard Towner, College Hill Presbyterian Church)

Then, if the problem is not resolved between the two persons and it is needed, according to Jesus, the second step is that they can reach out to one or two appropriate persons to work together with them to resolve their dispute. Often, if there isn't resolution the two parties will simply agree to disagree, and it would end with the private discussion. It is rare for it to go beyond this, and most issues simply don't need to involve others for arbitration. But if there is, it is the sort of arbitration in which one or two loved and loving, respected members help to restore broken relationships.

Then, the third step is only *after* these direct, private dealings fail that the church, the corporate fellowship, is brought into play. Notice that it isn't to random individuals but to the appropriate channels. Reconciliation is the goal, and each person has responsibility in it. We are responsible for our own anger and for reconciling with others. We are responsible for cleaning our own slate. And when we do this, the whole community, the system, is strengthened.

Different spiritual teachers talk about the "triple filter test." Ask yourself: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? If any answer is "no," then don't share it. And as a listener, I don't need to be hearing this if it is untrue or speculation, or it is negative or unkind, or it doesn't involve me and isn't necessary that I hear it. We use these filters to stop the flow of negativity and be advocates for positivity.

Family and systems therapists refer to this as triangulation. And you could say that these ancient guidelines say, "Don't triangulate, and don't let yourself be pulled into a triangle."

Open criticism, negative gossip is never appropriate. Critical statements, allegations, accusations to the public, to people who are not in position to help change the situation, are never appropriate. It not only undermines a fair process and hurts the other person, it is destructive to the whole community and tears it down. It is divisive.

There is a scene in the movie *Doubt*: "Rabbi," he said, "I have a problem: I just can't stop myself from gossiping." The rabbi thought for moment, and then gave him some sheets of paper from his drawer. "Take these," he said, "tear them into small pieces this evening, go round the village and put a handful of pieces on the door step of each person you have gossiped about. Then come back and see me." The man did as the rabbi told him. When he came back he asked the rabbi what he should do next. "Go round the village again tonight, gather up all the pieces and glue them back together again." "But that is impossible," said the man. "The wind has blown them all away." "Yes," replied the rabbi. "Now you know why gossip is so deadly."

It was the Dalai Lama who said, "The purpose of religion is to control yourself, not to criticize others."

Now, sometimes people feel that they need to let their friends "blow off steam," and that it is their duty to "be supportive" and let them dump a load of garbage on them. But that's not being supportive, because the moment it happens, all three parties are hurt and diminished: the one being talked about, the listener who has a diminished view of that person, and the talker who has been enabled to behave in this way. And so whenever bad stories are spread or gossip is spread, *the listeners bear responsibility, too.*

We all know that truth is best served by a fair and due process. And in these words in Matthew 18, truth is the secondary issue. The primary issue is kindness. It is building up others.

Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist monk and author, wrote,

For a community to be a real place of practice or worship, its members have to cultivate mindfulness, understanding and love. A church where people are unkind to each other or suppress each other is not a true church.

In Matthew, Jesus speaks this reality when he says, “Before you offer your gift at the altar, first be reconciled with your brother or sister.” In other words, to truly worship we cannot “write off” each other, but we must practice kindness.

It’s not just our gift that we have to offer, but *how* we offer it that’s important. I will end with a familiar story that is so appropriate:

Once there was a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Some of the younger monks had left in dissatisfaction, and no new men were joining. There were but a handful of monks and their leader, the abbot, remaining. They began fighting among themselves, each blaming the hard times on the faults and failings of the other.

One day a traveling rabbi stopped at the monastery for a night’s rest. He ate, and prayed alongside the other monks. The next day, as the rabbi prepared to continue on his journey, the abbot drew him aside. He told him of the problems of the monastery and asked him for his observations and for some advice to share with the other monks.

Upon hearing the abbot’s woes, the rabbi was quiet for some time.

“Cannot you give me some advice to help my monastery to thrive again?” the abbot begged.

“Your monks will not listen to my advice,” the rabbi replied. “But perhaps they would benefit from an observation. The Messiah dwells among you here at the monastery.”

“One of us?” asked the abbot astonished. “Which one?”

“Oh, that I cannot say,” he answered. “Share this with your brothers, and in time it shall be revealed to you.”

The abbot thanked him and sent him on his way. He then gathered the monks together, who listened in amazement to the news.

“One of us! But who?” each one asked out loud. Then to themselves they wondered, “It couldn’t be Brother Robert—or could it?”

“Surely not Brother Henry, but there are times when...”

“Not the youngest, well maybe...”

“The abbot himself?”

“Could it be me?”

Soon things began to change at the monastery as each began to see the Messiah in the other and to hear the Messiah’s words in each word spoken.

Soon people began to wander back to the monastery, and in time new men joined and the monastery thrived.

Friends, the way we behave sometimes says more about us than our proclamations. The Messiah dwells among us here—in our very midst.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)