

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

Reconciliation is one of the primary tasks of the Christian church. It is one of the core practices that Jesus invited his followers into, and today's reading from Matthew lays out a process for how to practice it. In short, it offers instructions for **how to be** the Body of Christ **together**.

These six short verses are a recognition of our human sinfulness and a tacit expectation that in our sinfulness we will hurt each other, whether we intend to or not. It is important to note, however, that while concerned with discipline, the instructions are not focused on punishment, but instead on reconciliation¹ – that is, mending what is broken and restoring what has been lost.

This point is further illuminated when you back up and look at the placement of today's passage in Matthew's gospel. It is sandwiched between two parables whose teachings underscore love, mercy, and inclusion² - first the parable of the Good Shepherd leaving the 99 to search for the 1 that is lost, and second the parable of the unforgiving servant, which offers a call to forgiveness we will explore next week.

¹ *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 4*, pg. 45.

² SaltProject's Lectionary Commentary for the Fourteenth Week After Pentecost.

But today's reading makes clear that what makes us followers of Christ is not that we never disagree or hurt one another, but that it is how we go about addressing and resolving the hurt that reveals our faithfulness. And in case we're wondering about that **how**, Jesus lays it all out for us.

The process he outlines is brilliant in the way that the whole of it builds community, but also in the way that each step of it is a repudiation of the unhealthy ways that we too often deal with conflict.³

When conflict arises, one of the first temptations we have is avoidance. It can be hard to have difficult conversations, and we instinctively want to protect ourselves. But Jesus tells us that being in a community requires something of us, and in this case, it means going directly to the source of the problem and not letting the hurt fester and grow.

Another temptation is to gossip. But in the first step, Jesus outlines not telling someone else, but directly communicating with the person or persons with whom you have issue. A simple image serves as an important reminder: communication should be a straight line – if it looks like a triangle or square or any other shape we're doing it wrong.

This approach implicitly says I respect you enough to give you space to rectify this without embarrassing you in front of others, and I have the humility to recognize I may have misunderstood something, or have something to learn.

³ The following step are a paraphrasing of theme from SaltProject's Lectionary Commentary for the Fourteenth Week After Pentecost.

If the one-on-one approach doesn't work, another temptation is to try and get people to take our side – to create an echo chamber of grievance where we feel supported and vindicated. Jesus is once again clear though, that we must stick with direct communication, only this time involving 1-2 other people to serve as witnesses and impartial third parties to help balance out the conversation. This approach also communicates respect and openness to solving the issue.

An extension of creating sides, and therefore winners and losers, is another temptation. When we're unsettled by conflict it can feel good to only air grievances with friendly audiences rather than the community as a whole. This is one of the most damaging temptations we can fall into, because it can be the catalyst for division.

But Jesus tells us that if one-on-one communication doesn't work, and if the conflict is not resolved with the addition of the wisdom and experience of a 1-2 leaders in the community, then the issue must be taken to the whole church. Doing this keeps everyone accountable, and accountability is a huge part of reconciliation.

Accountability means that there is a commitment to make right what has been wrong, and to accept the consequences of actions. But it also means seeking and serving Christ in all persons and respecting the dignity of every human being.

Lastly, the final temptation Jesus addresses is the temptation to write people off. Hear again his words: *...and if the offender refuses to listen to even the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

While this may seem like a proclamation to exile someone outside the community, it is actually a call to radically love them all the more.

After all, time and again Jesus interacted with Gentiles, tax collectors, prostitutes, and other outsiders – talking, eating, and drinking with them. By his example he was teaching us that no one is outside of the community of God’s love, and therefore to never stop reaching out in love to them, always yearning for the grace to restore what has been broken.⁴

Reconciliation is not easy, but it is the work that Jesus calls us into if we are to live in communities created in his name. Being in community, by definition, means that we are mutually dependent upon one another and we hold each other accountable.

To function effectively as a group we must commit to communicate with each other clearly, speak truth in love when needed, and be unambiguous about our boundaries. When this happens then we are less likely to hurt one another. And when we do this, God is present among us.

We know this because Jesus tells us this. When we center ourselves in practicing reconciliation and communication to create healthy communities, he proclaims: *For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*

We so often read this line on it’s own – and it is an eternal promise. But it is also a promise rooted in what a reconciling community looks like. It reflects the truth that in order to **be** the Body of Christ, we have to **be** the church – **together**.

This way of being is centered on churches, but I hope you can see how it also applies to our families, our workplaces, and society as a whole. It is a roadmap for both health and healing.

⁴ *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 4*, pg. 48.

My hope is that we, as individuals and as a parish community, live into this call of reconciliation – opening our ears to listen and our hearts in mercy – that the kingdom of God can come near here and now. Amen.