

September 5, 2026-18A The Rev. Molly Scherm

How do we manage our life together in the Church, the community of the Jesus Movement? How do we address disputes?

This is the question that lies behind today's passage from Matthew's gospel. It is a particularly compelling question to consider in the context of the often-ugly adversarial discourse with which we are surrounded in this time in the life of our nation and our world, and perhaps especially in this political season in which we've just gone to the polls and will do so again in November.

I appreciate the principles that underlie Jesus' teaching in today's gospel in terms of a responsibility I have taken on in the Diocese this year, that of overseeing our efforts to build and maintain a "Safe" church environment in our parishes and ministries. "Safe Church" efforts have sometimes been focused on protecting the Church from dangers within and without. Today we are working to reorient our conversation to the ways in which we can become more fully communities that recognize, welcome, and value all of our members.

In this morning's piece of Jesus' teaching, he suggests what should happen when conflicts and grievances arise in the life of the community of disciples. Jesus, in fact, seems to offer a very specific process – almost a recipe. When an argument or an accusation of wrongdoing occurs, the following should be initiated:

- A one-to-one conversation should take place
- A small group intervention
- An expanded group conversation
- If worse comes to worse – the community must kick the troublemaker out.

The passage concludes with Jesus' authorization of authority within the community for setting boundaries: *whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*

What do you suppose Jesus envisioned that the community of his disciples would look like after he was no longer with them? Obviously, he was concerned about it, to be offering directives in advance.

Do you think he imagined edifices like St. Peter's Rome, St. John the Divine, NYC, or even campus of Atonement, Westfield?

Did he plan on a Standing Liturgical Commission that would decide what prayers go into the Prayer Book, or Property Committees or Finance Committees? Did he think individual congregations would be doing Doodle Polls to schedule vestry meetings?

Could Jesus have envisioned that pieces of the community of disciples would someday be battling in civil court over property rights and rights to particular names (as they have done in recent years in California and South Carolina)?

Jesus did not know the particulars that would arise. What Jesus certainly **did** know is how important the community of the disciples would be, and, given the frailties and fallibility of even the best-intentioned disciples, how difficult maintaining that community would be.

In the last couple of weeks we've heard two halves of a conversation between Jesus and Peter; in the first part of the conversation Peter had a moment of great faith, in which he was able to recognize that Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed one, but just a moment later, Peter showed great short-sightedness, succumbing to the temptation to believe that his own agenda and assumptions were God's agenda and assumptions.

And it seems like this is virtually always where we make our errors in the community of the church – getting our concerns confused with God's.

We get ourselves riled up:

- sometimes about matters of doctrine and how we interpret scripture, like who God approves to serve in Holy Orders
- sometimes about our practice, like which forms of prayer we'll use in worship, or whether "remote consecration" is acceptable
- sometimes our concerns have to do with our symbols, like what color door we should have or where in the church the flag should stand – (and I assure you that all of these examples come from the real life of parishes I have been associated with!)
- and sometimes we get exercised about such basic human issues as who gets to be in charge of a decision.

When we stand outside a particular issue or look back on it in retrospect, we often conclude that we were investing energy in something that just wasn't as important as it seemed, but it is very hard to have perspective when we are caught up in the passion of our own conviction. I have been there: I've been the one ready to burn the

place down over some issue about which I was absolutely certain, but about which, in time, came to see more broadly.

Jesus advised the disciples in advance about how to resolve grievances because the Church IS so very important.

- We, the Church, are so often the place where we meet God and grow in our relationship to God
- We are the hands and feet, the heart and the voice through which God is acting in the world .

Let me add an important note here: we, the Church, are NOT the ONLY means through which God acts in the world, but it most certainly IS our call to proclaim God's love, to offer God's justice and mercy, and to care for God's children and God's world.

And if we are investing ourselves in squabbles that won't matter in five year's time (or five month's, or five weeks' time,) we're not putting our energy into what is important.

I don't think Jesus' outline of how to handle conflicts within the community of disciples is meant to be a literal blueprint.

It does provide important principles, however, that we need to hear and take seriously as we face the challenges of disagreement and grievance among ourselves when disagreement and grievance arise:

1. It is better to communicate in person and generally, if possible, one on one. Snarky comments on social media, and conversations soliciting support from a third party do not help the church (or any other body of people) to love one another and work toward a common good.
2. It is important to really listen, to be willing to set aside our own positions and assumptions, to try and truly understand the position that is different from our own.
3. It's important to keep working at it, and not to give up, not to write someone off or stomp away in anger if our own position is not the one that prevails.

Handling conflicts this way is not easy. It requires us to risk being vulnerable with one another. It requires us to sometimes change, to sometimes apologize, to sometimes admit that we have been wrong. It requires us to be patient, both with ourselves and with one another.

And these principles of constructive conflict resolution do not just apply to life in the community of faith, but rather to all of life in relationships with others, whether in our families – maybe ESPECIALLY in our families – or in workplace settings, or elsewhere.

The last part of Jesus' teaching in this passage is about "binding" and "loosing", and authority that Jesus gives the disciples to establish boundaries in the Beloved Community. It mirrors the charge Jesus offered to Peter in the gospel passage we heard three weeks ago: *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*"

I feel like this is a pretty dangerous passage in terms of its potential for abuse. The capacity of the Church and its leadership to assume our own wisdom in setting boundaries – in saying what's OK and what's not, who's in and who's out – is fundamentally pretty frightening. We, the Church, have not always gotten it right or acted with wisdom, compassion, and justice.

So I take that final promise - *where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them* – NOT as a validation that whatever we agree to, when two or three of us agree, is right, but rather, as an admonition that when we are making decisions, we need to seek the wisdom of God, and know that God's wisdom is there for us if we listen well enough.

It is, further, a promise that achieving compromise and reconciliation opens up incredible potential and possibility. When we heal our divisions and come together, God is powerfully at work and nothing is impossible.

As we continue to live into the adventure and opportunity of being the Church, in this crazy time when global national politics and world events seem to have turned so many things inside out – let's focus on the gospel invitation

- of learning to hear one another,
- value one another,
- accept one another,
- indeed, love one another

so that we might together be agents of the Gospel of Christ.