

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: September 10, 2023

Church Witness

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church. We have some interesting readings today around normal human behavior, and the way Jesus would like our lives to be. All with the understanding that we, no matter how hard we try, are going to make mistakes and have some conflicts in our personal and communal lives.

The subject matter of our Gospel could not be more fitting for Christian communities in every age, place, and situation. One of the things that plagues most Christian communities and society as a whole is the inability to handle confrontation and disagreements. Then there is our mutual accountability when it comes to sin in its various forms of pride, ego, greed, fear and all those negative voices and actions that can pop up in us. We simply don't know how to live together, fight together, and stay together. And this is because we (all of us - not just our brother or sister) are sinners.

The harmony of Jesus' teaching about conflict and the role of witnesses has its history within the Deuteronomic and Levitical codes, meaning this was a Jewish standard of practice. But there is something subtly different here. Jesus is not instructing us to bring witnesses to testify against our "brother or sister" who has sinned against us, but to testify to the exchange between the two.

Remember that old Gospel phrase, "Can I get a witness!" Witnessing someone's story is the greatest gift you can give them: listening. What Jesus is trying to teach the disciples is that when you give someone your ear, they actually hear themselves, and often can then

discern the right move forward. This requires active listening and not thinking of an answer at the same time.

And if you find yourself in the middle of some type of dispute, learn to listen to yourself, be curious about what is motivating your words and actions. We are called to honor each other's stories and then find a way forward.

Witnessing is not criticizing, judging, or gossiping about the situation. It is simply being present in the moment when someone you know is struggling. Chances are, if there is a disagreement, both parties are hurting. Hopefully being able to be heard will ease the pain. And let's face it, we all have our demons and we all have our moments, and yet we are called by our very being here today, to love one another. Not my words, but Jesus'.

The flow of today's passage is important to note, as there is movement from the individual to the communal. Where there is an issue, Jesus says, confront it directly, one-to-one, face-to-face. If this does not solve the problem, include someone else to witness the conversation, and if all else fails - take it to the community as a whole.

From individual witness to communal attention, the movement of this Gospel passage is a progression that follows the development of a conflict from its origins in individual matters to its conclusion at the community level. And although Jesus is speaking hypothetically, the probability of the need for these considerations is around 100%.

This is why we are here at church, in a safe space where we can practice Jesus' teachings. Here there are built-in buffers through the people in the Bishop's Committee, to the priest, and to the Bishop. This is why I urge you to keep up with the Diocese convention material and let your voice be heard. I admit, mistakes get made. People can and sometimes will willingly hold on to past hurts. But in this church we are here to practice loving and serving the Lord through our relationships with each other.

Interestingly enough, there is also the possibility that Jesus was being ironic at the end of his statement about Gentiles and tax collectors. At first reading one might think that Jesus is describing an expulsion or exclusion of those not in agreement. However, we know Jesus himself spoke, healed, and shared meals with Gentiles and tax collectors. Is Jesus giving us an ironic twist? That no matter the circumstance, you will always belong? Once we are in, we can never be out. We are called to love one another as a beloved community.

Jesus says, essentially, that being a member of the church means you have a responsibility. If your sheep gets lost, you don't look for an hour and call it quits. You get out there and find that sheep, and if you know anything at all about animals, beating them will get you nowhere. Leading, as Jesus models for us, is about lovingly caring and journeying together.

Then Jesus concludes with, "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." There is no question of agreement at this point. Jesus is present, really present, where two or three are gathered in the Divine Name. What needs to be noted here is Jesus is not just where two or three agree in Jesus' name, but where two are three are gathered; presumably this includes the two who cannot listen to each other about what is the matter, and how to handle it. Even there, and perhaps especially there, Christ Jesus is present.

Jesus offers a simple guide to help us handle our sin and its consequences here. But far more importantly Jesus promises us that he is present, that his presence is real for us, when we are gathered in his name — both in agreement and in disagreement. This story is presented within the context of the overarching narrative of the Gospel of Matthew, which began with a promised real presence of God, which began with the promise of a child named Emmanuel, God is With Us. Amen