

Christ is with us!

In our gospel reading today, Jesus has some instructions about how Christians ought to behave, and it doesn't include sending passive-aggressive notes to one another when we have conflict.

Jesus says, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone... If you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

It's an escalating series of responses, but look how it begins: "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone."

If you have a grievance—if your fellow-Christian is gossiping about you, or spreading false rumors, or cheated or defrauded you, or stole your lunch out of the office fridge—Jesus tells you to go and talk to the person directly. Address the problem in private, face-to-face.

There are two major effects of following this instruction. First, if you go talk to the person privately, you're not publicly shaming them. You're giving them a chance to change their behavior without subjecting them to the court of public opinion.

Now, Jesus' instructions do involve taking the matter to the whole community if that becomes necessary, but it doesn't start that way. It starts with a private conversation between the two parties.

The other effect of meeting face-to-face is that you can't be anonymous. You can't hide behind anonymity or a vague "some people think..." You must be honest and speak for yourself.

These instructions can be hard to follow. It's painful to hear someone say, "You have wronged me." It's often painful even to look someone in the eye and say, "You have wronged me."

Many of us, especially the ones adverse to conflict, would rather skirt around the issue, avoid talking about it, sigh and roll our eyes and leave passive-aggressive notes, hoping the other person will get the hint. We stew in our resentment until it is insufferable, until it boils over in some spectacular way.

But Jesus is telling us how Christians ought to behave: we should be honest, forthright, direct. Being direct isn't the same thing as being rude or harsh, though it may feel that way. Being direct means standing behind what you say, not relying on anonymity or passive-aggression to get what you want.

Being direct means addressing a disagreement face-to-face, looking the other person in the eye. As Christians, we are called to address disagreements in this way, directly, honestly.

If being direct, speaking face-to-face, fails, then Jesus tells us to involve some other members of the community. Notice these other people are supposed to be witnesses, neutral third parties; it's not about getting together a gang of people who agree with you to bully the other party into submission. They're more like arbiters, holding both parties accountable and bearing witness to what is said. If those witnesses aren't enough to bring about reconciliation, then the whole community gets involved, and if the offending party still won't listen, "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

Now, before I go on, let me say one thing about that line. In the most extreme case, Jesus says, "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." But from the perspective of the church, who are Gentiles and tax collectors?

They are the mission field of the church!

They are the people the church is supposed to be reaching. So even in the most extreme case, when someone is removed from the community, there is still the possibility of reconciliation, the opportunity for that person to come back into the community.

Through this whole passage, Jesus is telling us how the Christian community ought to be, and how we ought to treat each other. We fall far short of that standard sometimes.

When should we speak to someone directly, how often do we instead complain behind that person's back?

When we should speak honestly about a disagreement, how often do we exaggerate to support our case, on the one hand, or silently stew in our resentment, on the other?

When we should resolve a conflict one-on-one, how often do we enlist allies to our side to gang up on our opponent?

The instructions in Matthew challenge us to be better, as individuals and as a community. They challenge us to be more honest, more forthright, and fairer.

They challenge us to resolve our conflicts and disagreements in a way that is difficult but, ultimately, healthier and more Christian.

Jesus is telling us how Christians should treat one another, especially in the face of conflict or wrongdoing.

The verses we heard from Romans this morning express a similar sentiment. Paul writes, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

I said earlier that being direct isn't the same as being mean. And likewise, love is not the same as "niceness." Loving one another doesn't mean avoiding conflict. Loving our neighbor requires us to be honest and forthright. Sometimes, loving our neighbor requires us to address disagreements.

Paul goes on to tell us that there should be no complaining behind someone's back, no gossiping or bullying, no anonymous complaints, no passive-aggressive notes. Rather, we should live with integrity and consistency, willing to speak the truth and stand by what we say.

To me, this is the core of the readings we've heard today. We shouldn't act and speak one way in private, and another way in public. We shouldn't act friendly to someone while disparaging them behind their back. We shouldn't offer anonymous criticism we aren't willing to say directly to someone's face.

Living this way, living honorably, as Paul says, is not easy. We all fall short of it. But we should still aim for this standard. We should strive to behave this way not only because Jesus told us to (though that is a good reason in itself), but because of what Jesus says at the end of today's gospel reading. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Jesus tells us how we should behave as Christians. And then Jesus tells us that he is present with us. Whenever two or three are gathered, Jesus is there. Wherever two or three of us are gathered, Jesus is here with us. Just think—if we take this promise of Jesus seriously, the implications for how we behave are tremendous.

If Jesus Christ himself were standing right next to you, wouldn't you be on your best behavior? I certainly would. It's not about avoiding some divine punishment.

If Jesus Christ were in the room, you'd want to behave in a Christian way. You'd want to live up to Jesus' expectations.

What Jesus says in our Gospel today, is wherever we are gathered, Jesus is there. Jesus is here with us when we worship. Jesus is with us when we sit down for a meeting or when we gather for Bible study, or when we go out to do service in our community.

Even when only two or three people gather, Jesus is there. When you stand face-to-face with the person who has sinned against you, when you look in the eye of the person with whom you have a disagreement, Jesus is right there with you.

This is one of those truths that is both a blessing and a challenge. Yes, Christ is present with us—thanks be to God! And yes, Christ is present with us—so we really ought to act like it.

As Christians, we are called to a high standard of behavior. We are called to behave honorably, to be forthright, to address conflict directly and fairly. It's not easy. And Christ is present with us. When we try, Christ is present. When we fail, Christ is present. When we succeed, even a little, Christ is present.

Where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, he is there among them. Christ is with us. Let us all try to live like it. Amen.