

God is always with us

Every so often on my Facebook feed I'll find a series of pictures chronicling the passive-aggressive notes people leave for their neighbours, co-workers, or fellow motorists about something they're doing that isn't liked.

For example, a note on the door of the office fridge that says, "Jerry, I know you're stealing my lunch!" Or a note posted on a neighbour's door saying, "I heard you playing loud music at 11.02 p.m. last night. You're keeping everyone in the neighbourhood up."

These little notes are anonymous, patronizing, and probably ineffective. They're passive-aggressive because the note-writer won't go and talk to the other party directly, but instead leaves a note for the other person to find.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus has some instructions about how Christians ought to behave, and surprise, surprise it doesn't include sending passive-aggressive notes. 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 rumours, 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 and talk to the person privately, you're not publicly shaming them. You're giving them a chance to change their behaviour without subjecting them to the court of public opinion.

Yes, 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 a vague "some people think..." You have to 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 conflict adverse, 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 too much and it boils over in some spectacular way.

But Jesus is telling us how Christians ought to behave: we should be honest, forthright, and direct. Being direct isn't the same thing as being rude or mean, 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-on, 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." But what does that really mean?

In the most extreme case, Jesus implies that we let such a one be to you as someone who is a traitor, hated, dishonest, an outsider. But from the perspective of the Church, the Gentiles and tax collectors are our mission field! They are the people the church is supposed to be reaching out to.

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.

Jesus, through this whole passage, is telling us how Christian community ought to be, how we ought to treat each other. But we constantly fall short of that standard. When we should 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 today 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.

Jesus is urging us treat one another, especially in the face of conflict or wrongdoing, with respect and honesty.

The verses we heard from Paul's letter to the Romans this morning express a similar sentiment. Paul writes, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another... Love does no wrong to a neighbour; 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 neighbour requires us to be honest and forthright. Sometimes, loving our neighbour requires us to address disagreements.

Paul goes on to say, "Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably, as in the day..." meaning, let us live our lives in a way that is honest and forthright. Not complaining behind someone's back, not gossiping or bullying, not complaining anonymously, not sending 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 honourably, as Paul says, is not easy. We all fall short of it. But we should still aim for this standard, striving to behave this way not only because Jesus told us to, 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."

So in this passage Jesus not only tells us how we should behave as Christians but also that he is present with us. Just think—if we take this promise of Jesus seriously, the implications for how we behave are tremendous.

I'm sure you all remember the Christmas song, "Santa Claus is coming to town," The whole song is about Father Christmas knowing whether you've been bad or good... so be good, for goodness' sake." Its point is that you should behave—you should be good—even when no one is around. You should act as though Father Christmas is watching and be on your best behaviour.

If Jesus himself were standing right next to you, wouldn't you be on your best behaviour? I certainly would. It's not just about hoping to get nice presents from Father Christmas, or about avoiding some divine punishment. If Jesus 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 that he is with us in the room, always. Jesus is here with us when we worship. Jesus is with us when we sit down for a Church meeting, or when we gather for fellowship, or when we go out in service in our community.

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

I find both scary and amazing... and it's not easy. 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's try to live like it every day. Amen