

Proper 18A 2017 Sermon

Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus said, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But 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. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

There has been a lot of research done in recent years regarding the effects of social relationships on physical health. Many studies show that having a significant amount of social relationships in one's life leads to greater physical health, while a *lack* of social relationships brings measurable harm to one's physical health. University of Georgia researcher Kerstin Emerson notes that "In public health, we talk all the time about obesity and smoking and have all these interventions, but not about people who are lonely and socially isolated... Lonely people are dying, they're less healthy, and they are costing our society more."¹ Loneliness has been linked to increased risks for heart attacks, metastatic cancer, Alzheimer's disease, and other illnesses.¹ Researchers studying the expression of human genes have found that early on in human evolution, "when survival depended crucially on cooperation and communication, social isolation was a huge risk. So evolution shaped the primitive human brain to desire and need social interaction in the same way it shaped the brain to desire and need food."¹ We are wired for relationship and community!

But if the **amount** of social interaction is important, so is the *quality* of our relationships. *Poor* relationships can adversely affect health: sustained anger or holding onto past hurts, for instance, can significantly increase your risk for heart attack, stroke, anxiety, depression, and respiratory problems – can even shorten your lifespan.²

In light of all this, it is of some concern that many of the traditional venues in our society for social interaction are experiencing decline. We all know that church attendance has been declining for the past 50 years, and *significantly* so in recent years. (And I don't think it's an accident that the increase of polarization in our society has been taking place at the same time as the decline in church attendance.) Service clubs such as Rotary, Kiwanis, and Lion's Club are likewise declining in membership. We shop much more online and much less in physical stores, with the result being that we don't interact in retail spaces nearly as much

as we used to. More and more, communication involves less face-to-face meeting, and more electronic texting or social media interaction. Such electronic conversations have even replaced hearing each others' real voices on the phone. One researcher who has studied generational changes for the past 25 years writes: "Around 2012, I noticed abrupt shifts in teen behaviors and emotional states... In all my analyses of generational data—some reaching back to the 1930s—I had never seen anything like it... 2012... was exactly the moment when the proportion of Americans who owned a smartphone surpassed 50 percent.

"The arrival of the smartphone has radically changed every aspect of teenagers' lives, from the nature of their social interactions to their mental health.

"More comfortable [on their phones] in their bedrooms than in a car or at a party, today's teens are **physically safer** than teens have ever been. They're markedly less likely to get into a car accident and, having less of a taste for alcohol than their predecessors, are less susceptible to drinking's attendant ills. [As face-to-face relating has dropped, so has dating, and teen pregnancies.]

"Psychologically, however, [teens] are **more** vulnerable... Rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011. [We prayed last week in our Prayers of the People for one of those teens who killed himself in Littleton, and for his close friend who is the grandson of a couple in our parish.] It's not an exaggeration," this researcher continues, "to describe iGen [what **she** calls this new generation] as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones."³ And the concomitant decline in face-to-face relationships.

As a nation, we have been engaging in fewer activities that bring us together (such as church), and we have been exposing ourselves to more and more influences that *alienate* us from one another. Before the advent of cable news channels and internet news outlets, practically all of us Americans shared the same network news from ABC, CBS, or NBC. Nowadays there are a plethora of news sources that specialize in reporting the news from certain slanted perspectives. What one hears if one listens to a politically *conservative* news outlet may be the exact **opposite** of what one hears from a politically *progressive* news outlet. And because we **only** listen to the news interpreted from our own preferred slant, we never even *hear* the other side – with the result that the gap between us grows larger. In the days of Walter Cronkite, it was considered a virtue to report the news from a balanced, unbiased perspective; in today's reality, a news outlet's **ratings depend** on getting one side riled up against the other – *purposely* fomenting the very anger we have just noted increases the risk of heart attack, stroke, respiratory problems, anxiety, and depression.

AND – it alienates us from each other, compromising our community with one another, we who are members together of the Body of Christ. It drains us of spiritual life, which depends on the flow of God's Spirit. If we have put a stop to

the flow of God's Spirit out from us, then the flow of God's Spirit into us is likewise stopped, and our spiritual life dries up.

In today's Gospel reading, it appears at first glance that Jesus is prescribing the correct procedure to deal with a wayward church member. David Lose summarizes this procedure this way: "*Someone offends you, confront them. If that doesn't work, try an intervention. If that fails, cut them off and kick them out.*" But then Dr. Lose suggests another interpretation. He writes: "[W]hat if Matthew isn't simply setting up the rules of engagement but rather is trying to build authentic Christian community? What if the point is less about having a code of conduct to follow and more about regaining a brother or sister? And what if Matthew's major concern isn't actually settling disputes but creating an environment where Christ's presence continues to bring forgiveness, healing, and joy?"⁴

I would change that last question just slightly, and ask, "What if Matthew's major concern is that we live as the Body of Christ, *wherein* Christ's presence continues to bring forgiveness, healing, and joy." For I firmly believe that, just as our *physical* DNA is programmed for living in community, so our *spiritual* DNA is programmed for living in community – members, one of another, in the Body of Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way: "Christian [community] is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate."⁵ Fr. Richard Rohr bemoans the fact that for centuries we Christians have interpreted St. Paul's writings as speaking about individuals being privately "saved," whereas if we take a step back and look at Paul's life's work, we see he was actually about establishing local churches across the Mediterranean, local instances of the Body of Christ, communities of the Gospel. "For Paul," writes Fr. Rohr, "**community** is the living organism that communicates the Gospel message... If Christ's cosmic message doesn't take form in a concrete group of people, then, as far as Paul is concerned, it is an unbelievable message. An autonomous Christian is as impossible as an independent arm or leg... No single one of us is the whole Christ, and 'the eye cannot say to the hand, I do not need you.'" (I Cor. 12:21)⁶ ...

"Paul does not make heroes of individuals, but it is precisely *as* members of the Body that they 'shine like stars' as 'perfect children of God...' (Philippians 2:15). Paul sees his small communities as an adequate 'leaven' by which God will eventually change the whole debauched Roman Empire..."⁷

And, my friends, I believe that Paul would see our churches today in the same light: as communities of Christ's love, Christ's cross, Christ's forgiveness, Christ's reconciliation, Christ's presence by which God will eventually transform the whole of our mixed-up, polarized world!

My friends, we are such a community – together the Body of Christ in this place. May God use us as leaven, spreading the Spirit of Christ’s forgiveness, healing, and love out from us into a hurting, divided world.

AMEN

¹ “Loneliness grows from individual ache to public health hazard” by Amy Ellis Nutt, January 31, 2016 *Washington Post.com*

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/loneliness-grows-from-individual-ache-to-public-health-hazard/2016/01/31/cf246c56-ba20-11e5-99f3-184bc379b12d_story.html?utm_term=.9b704f2320fc

² “7 Ways Anger Is Ruining Your Health: Constantly losing your cool can hurt more than your relationships” by Debbie Strong. <https://www.everydayhealth.com/news/ways-anger-ruining-your-health/>

³ “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?: More comfortable online than out partying, post-Millennials are safer, physically, than adolescents have ever been. But they’re on the brink of a mental-health crisis.”

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>

⁴ “Christian Community” <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/09/pentecost-14-a-christian-community/>

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Reader’s Edition, Fortress Press, 2015, p. 13

⁶ Richard Rohr daily meditation, Tuesday, April 7, 2015, “You Cannot Get There, You Can Only Be There” <https://cac.org/you-cannot-get-there-you-can-only-be-there-2015-04-07/>

⁷ Richard Rohr daily meditation, “The Body of Christ,” Friday, May 19, 2017, <https://cac.org/the-body-of-christ-2017-05-19/>