

Deacon Randy Perkins
Ezekiel 33:7-9
Romans 13:8-10
Matthew 18:15-20

23RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
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True story: A young engineer attempting to cross the Atlantic Ocean in a kayak traveled into a heavy storm and was stranded on a deserted island, where he lived isolated for five years. At last, a Navy crew discovered the island and him on it. When they arrived, they were shocked to find three beautiful buildings. The Navy commander asked the man about the buildings, and he confirmed he built them all. "What's this one," they asked? "That's my house, where I've lived the past five years." Next to it was a building with a steeple. "This one looks like a church," the commander said. "It is. That's the church I attend." "Wow!" the general replied. "And this one next to it, it also looks like a church." The man gave the commander a disgusted look and said, "Yeah, I used to go there, but it's full of hypocrites, so I had to find a new church."

There is an old saying: "The Church would be perfect if it weren't for all the people." And I bet you're thinking, "Darn right!" And technically, and even theologically, that's a true statement. Because we're all humans here, and we're all imperfect humans. People say things we wish they had not said. People make decisions we do not understand. People hold opinions that frustrate us. Sometimes people behave in ways that seem completely inconsistent with the Gospel.

It's tempting and fairly easy, especially in a church community setting, when frustrations and hurts happen, just to walk away. Or at least to write off the people we believe have done us wrong. To sever relationships. To find our own little clique to stand against our misguided brothers and sisters.

That's nothing new. Jesus knew that would happen even before the church got off the ground! And Jesus also knew that kind of mindset would kill the fledgling movement he was building. Jesus knows that human relationships are at the center of our human church, and he calls us to remain in our committed

relationships, with our communities and with the people who make up our communities, even when things go wrong or become uncomfortable or frustrating.

And today he offers some incredibly practical advice about how to address the personal hurts we experience at the hands of our brothers and sisters in Christ. “If your [sister] or brother sins against you, go and tell [them their] fault between you and [them] alone.” Jesus doesn’t say, “If someone disappoints you, walk away.” Or, “Go tell the people who think like you about what happened.” He doesn’t say, “If someone disagrees with you, write them off.” He doesn’t say, “Go find people who think exactly like you.” Instead, Jesus urges us to repair the relationship. Go to the person. In private. Talk with them. Listen to them. Try again. If that doesn’t work, ask for others’ input. In other words, do everything possible to preserve the relationship.

Because, at its core, Christianity is all about relationships. It’s not simply about believing the right things, and it certainly isn’t about always doing the right things. St. Paul makes that very clear in our second reading today, writing words very similar to words that came straight from Jesus’s mouth. “Brothers and sisters: Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” Christianity is about learning how to love people because loving people is the ultimate manifestation of loving God.

Loving people we don’t agree with is not our cultural norm. Remaining in relationship with people we believe have wronged us runs counter to the advice of all the trending self-help gurus. On social media, we read and maybe even write things like, “If you don’t believe this, then you can unfriend me now.” People who anger us or post things we don’t like are gifted with being blocked. Relationships become disposable the moment they become a burden or cause any negative emotion.

But, when it comes to the relationships we have that are the result of our Christian community, Jesus rejects that instinct. He reminds us that the Church was never intended to be a gathering of people who agree about everything, but people who learn how to stay in communion with each other even in the midst of conflict.

Think about the first disciples. Let’s consider Peter and Matthew. Peter, formerly Simon the Zealot, belonged to group that was dedicated to ending Roman domination. Matthew, on the other hand, had worked as a tax collector for the Roman government. They certainly did not share the same backgrounds, and they

probably had very different political opinions. But Jesus put them at the same table. My guess is that there were some interesting conversations.

Peter and Paul had a serious disagreement early on about whether Gentiles could be in the church and whether Jews and Gentiles could be in community with each other. Where would we be today if they'd each gone their separate ways, forming their own churches? Luckily, they stayed, and today they're the human founders of a church with 1.42 billion members.

Today we have our own disagreements. Disagreements about how liturgies should look, Disagreements about what social causes we ought to support. Even disagreements about who should be welcome in our community.

Like it or not, that's the entire history of the Church Jesus founded. And the truth is that if we had a church where we all agreed about everything, we'd probably all have a church of one! And, as the stranded engineer discovered, even a church of one has its problems!

But Jesus doesn't call us to do this on our own. We're called to community. Jesus didn't gather people who thought exactly alike. He gathered very different people and taught them something much more difficult—how to become a community of brothers and sisters, how to become Church.

That is what Jesus is trying to teach us. Our relationships transcend any differences and disagreements because they aren't founded on politics, personalities, preferences, or opinions. Our church relationships, our unity, they come from Christ, and from our shared desire to come into communion with our living God. We're reminded of that every time we approach this altar. Despite all our differences, we all walk forward to receive the same Christ. And we take Jesus at his word when he says, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there also."