

Perhaps you've heard the story of the man who sought out a guru of renowned wisdom who lived in a remote mountain cave. After a difficult climb he found the guru and asked, "O wise one, what is the secret to a happy life?" The guru replied, "It is very simple, my child: never argue with fools." The man said, "What, that's it? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard! I can't believe I came all this way just for that! Some guru you are!" The guru said, "I'm sorry. You are right." And the man went home believing that he had won the argument, so he must be pretty smart, and definitely wiser than that guru.

When we hear the word "sin," we tend to think of moral failings, but the concept is much broader. The best metaphors for sin are "missing the mark," in the sense of failing to hit the bullseye on a target, or "going astray," like a sheep. Neither has the sense of moral culpability. Even when we completely miss the point, like the man in the joke, it doesn't mean that anyone got hurt. Another way of describing sin is anything that takes us further from God, and that's not exactly wrong, but certainly misleading, because God is always with us. I love that in today's Gospel, Jesus makes his promise always to be with us in the context of functional, pragmatic responses to sin.

In particular, I love that Jesus shows us that small things, like relationships between individuals, and big things, like God's intentions for the Church, are connected. You've probably heard people say that God probably doesn't care about them, and sometimes they're the same people who say that if they ever went into a church, the building would collapse in on them... well, both of those things can't be right. And of course, neither is. But we miss the point when we think that sayings like, "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven," mean that we can control God, or when Jesus talks about God doing what we ask in his name.

No, of course that is not consistent with the rest of the Gospel, and it doesn't even make sense by itself. Inevitably human beings would demand contradictory things from God, the granting of which would be the undoing of Creation. But remember that an ancient audience would have understood that when one person does something in the name of the other, that means acting as that person's representative, chosen because they share the same will, values, and goals. It's like how an ambassador acts in the name of a country or its ruler. Here, Jesus talks about the whole community being gathered in his name. So, rather than one member of the church acting as Jesus's representative, Jesus's incarnational vision is that the church itself represents him by uniting ourselves to his will, values, and goals.

This has profound implications for how we function, both in relationship with people and groups outside the church, and amongst ourselves, where the focus is today. While Jesus articulates a vision of unity, ironically, his vision of a community in his likeness almost guarantees conflict. We are meant to function in a very different way from the secular world, which itself is a manifestation of human nature, so when

Christians are doing things right, we will be doing them differently from the secular world, and also, that when we have internal conflicts, we should resist the temptation to handle them the way the secular world does.

Another thing I love about these sayings is that Jesus does not describe the process of reconciliation between sinner and community in terms of punishment, rejection, groveling, shame, or self-abasement. Jesus's intended conflict resolution process isn't just an expression of divine grace, but also an expression of the principle that the whole community is like Jesus; if one part of the body is attacking another, the body cannot function anywhere near its full potential, and could very well die from the conflict.

So Jesus describes a process that avoids public humiliation, or even public confrontation, if at all possible, and focuses on facts, solutions, and above all, reconciliation. And he sets a realistic goal. All he asks is that people listen: "If the member listens to you, you have regained that one." We don't all have to agree. Like Jesus, we should always listen, even though we can't say yes to everything. And by the same token, Jesus does not make his presence conditional on the community being perfect. Not only would that be impossible, but it would make Jesus functionally irrelevant. Jesus is part of the solution to trouble, not a reward for the unattainable, and unlike the guru, Jesus is proactive, longs to be with us, and comes to us.

But when we think about Jesus's promise to be among us, we imagine his presence in ways that please us. We imagine him comforting us, sharing his wisdom and courage, and let's be honest, we imagine him affirming our preferences and prejudices, sharing our priorities, friends, and enemies. And to be more honest, there are plenty of times when we'd prefer him not to be among us: when we're gossiping or complaining or making offerings to the idols of society. Sometimes, when secular ways seem particularly appealing, we'd prefer Jesus look away.

Fortunately, Jesus never does. He knew that both human individuals and groups are unreliable. He was concerned that his followers would be able to reconcile their differences. He wanted his body to be able to heal. Even the part that really sounds like a threat, "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector," only sounds that way until you consider what Mark Davis pointed out: "By this stage in Matthew's gospel, treating someone 'as a Gentile' might mean: Healing a demonized daughter (15:21-28) and feeding [by the thousands] (15:32-39). Treating someone 'as a tax collector' might mean: Eating together (9:9-10), calling as a disciple (10:3), and partying together as friends (11:19)."* So if the community is following Jesus faithfully, even the most foolish individuals will be treated lovingly, as impulsive children or lost sheep, who need merely to be turned back in the right direction, not as wolves or bandits. Consider how the letters of the apostles, which addressed churches that had far worse problems than any I've ever seen firsthand, never wanted to destroy or cut off those churches, but rather set them on the right track, be reconciled with them, and reconcile the differences within

them.

For Christians, worship is important for many compelling reasons, including that our worship helps us to reorient ourselves, collectively, into the pattern of life God intends for us. Think about the order of service in the Eucharist, our normative worship. God comes to us in the Word, and we respond with reflection (the sermon) — adoration (the silence) — affirmation (the creed) — petition (the prayers of the people) — contrition (the confession) — then absolution and peace. Just as the readings build to the climax of the Gospel, just as God's revelations culminated in the person of Jesus, so too do our responses build from words and feelings to, finally, action.

After we make our peace with God and with one another, we put our thoughts and feelings into practice. We begin to walk the talk, to walk in love, as Christ loves us. So all of our worship is simultaneously personal and universal. Each of us contributes something, whether we make a monetary contribution, an offering of music, or offer merely our time, our presence and attention.

All is sacred, for all we have and all we are come from God, and the act of dedicating things to God makes them sacred again. That is one of the reasons why we do not sing the doxology at the offertory — the act speaks for itself; adding to it comes off as self-congratulatory, and keeps our attention on ourselves when we are meant to be turning it fully towards God, who is about to arrive among us in the Eucharist.

The act of offering is an act of sacrifice, but also praise and thanksgiving for all God has given us, and trust and hope in what God will do for us. And God is generous. By God's grace we see the Church offering herself as a whole body, the fulfillment of Jesus's words that when we are in accord with heaven, God will bring things on Earth into the divine order. And so our offerings of time, attention, and money are also incarnational. Since the Church is the Body of Christ, he is present in every moment of worship and service.

Even when our worship services end, the dismissal assumes we will offer ourselves to the world for Christ's sake, having grown in actual wisdom, newly reconciled, healed, encouraged, sanctified: offering our best selves. We are not so much dispersed as sent, as God's offering to the world. We may often miss, but God hits the mark every time.

*<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/09/the-power-of-reconciliation.html>