

The Jesus Community

A sermon preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field at St. Peter's Church

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One of the quarrels I have with Matthew's Gospel, and those of you who know me well know I have a lot of them, is that this gospel is very legalistic. Matthew bends over backwards to portray Jesus *as* the Law, is very interested in rules, and is disturbingly into, punishment. This passage in particular bugs me because I can easily bring to mind people, maybe even myself, who have often been far too excited about Jesus' comment that we should go and "point out the fault" of someone who has sinned. It is, after all, a lot of fun to dissect the behavior of others and point out how wrong they are. This passage appeals to that desire we all have to focus on each other's faults as handy distractions from our own.

But if I take a good hard look at Matthew and this passage, what becomes clear is a deep concern for community; authentic, Christian community. That which we all say we want without any real understanding of what it is or how difficult it is to pull off. Community is a word that we churchy folk love to throw around and that conjures up an image of a group of perpetually smiling, nurturing, caring, sensitive, always forgiving people. An image of a place where we are never lonely, we are accepted for exactly who we are, and where everybody knows our name. And who wouldn't want that? It's a great vision. The problem is reality—the reality that the church community is made up of people, actual people; people who can be irritable, irrational, challenging, selfish, difficult, unreliable—not that I am talking about you or me, of course. So what to do with this pretty big gulf between the vision and the reality, how do we replace an unrealistic vision and work with who we are and what we have to make a true community in Christ?

A good place to start is with Jesus and his words which, as usual, inject a healthy dose of reality, candor and wisdom into the conversation and which can, according to the Rev. David Lose, be boiled down into the following: 5 "Jesus rules" for community:

1. People, all people, mess up—to use the churchy word, sin. (I know "sin" is a difficult word—it conjures up images of, well, eternal punishment. But sin is Bible shorthand for "missing the mark"—putting something other than God at the center of our lives and that distortion leads us to, as Gretchen Wolff Pritchard puts it in the children's stories I tell, "lie, and cheat, and steal, and hurt each other, and worship strange and ugly gods).
2. Communities are made up of people who sin (i.e. made up of people)—even in a place as healthy as St. Peter's.
3. When sin happens and you are involved put the problem into words and do something about it. Go talk to the other person directly rather than talk behind his or her back.
4. If that doesn't work, involve other members of the community. NOT to "gang up" on another, or to pile on, but as a way of involving and preserving the larger community.
5. If that doesn't work, things are serious and not only you, but the whole community is at risk. This is a tricky one. Jesus says that if all previous efforts at reconciliation have failed, that one should be to us like a Gentile and tax collector; which lots of people have been quick to interpret as "you should throw that person out". But you will remember how Jesus treats tax collectors and Gentiles, they are his closest friends, so I really don't think Jesus is encouraging us to write

anyone off as hopeless—throw them out. I think what he is emphasizing is that a problem left to fester will eventually infect the whole body—people will take sides, become entrenched in a position, and the chance for reconciliation becomes slim. The health and well-being of the community is in jeopardy and, Jesus says, you had better be aware of that and act, keep acting and find a way to reconcile the situation.

Now if you are thinking, whoa that sounds like a lot of work, you are right. It is. Community, real community, is hard to come by and hard to maintain. It is worth it because to find real community is to experience the reality of God's fellowship and existence right in your midst—just as Jesus promised he would be present whenever two or three are gathered in his name. And when we gather this way amazing things can happen because Jesus is in fact right in the middle, forming and being formed by the community's sharing.

The plain fact is, we are all in many different communities; kids sports groups, dog park groups, social media groups, exercise groups and so on. Each of these groups has unique characteristics. Some are social, superficial. Some are intimate and more meaningful (while at the same time riskier and harder). Whenever two or three or more are gathered there is community—the question for us as church is, what kind of community do we want to have? Do we want a place that can encourage us and hold us accountable? Are we looking for a place we can be honest about our hopes and fears, dreams and anxieties?

We can determine, we do determine, what kind of community we are and are going to be. And our choice makes a difference not only for those who are part of the community but also for those we may or may not choose to serve.

We can choose by shrugging our shoulders and sort of letting things happen or we can choose by wrestling with who we are and who we are called to become. This takes effort on multiple levels, effort as individuals, as groups and as a large group. Over the past few years we have had individuals at St Peter's talking about, meditating on and wrestling with what life in Christ looks like through the Discipleship series, through House Church, through ministries such as TNT or the Refugee group. Some of us have done Gifts Discernment in which we have contemplated who we were created to be and how to live into it. The Vestry has worked on what it means to be Christian in the 21st century, how do we live out our faith, how do we witness to our faith in the world? And because we are all members of One Body what each of us does affects the entire community—so the more that engage in this kind of work, the better we all are.

Today we stand at a pivotal place in the history of this 256 year old church—we are about to contemplate building new space—space for us to imagine and dream our way into, space for us to grow into God's dream for us. Looking back over the last 250 years we know, more or less, who we have been—how we have nurtured people in and witnessed to the good news that is Jesus Christ, how we have served the neighborhood. We know God's "then" and we give thanks for all who have gone before us. But the Gospel question is never about looking backwards—it is a powerful, compelling life force that pushes and pulls us forward into God's next. And we, you and me, have decisions to make, choices, that will shape how we live into God's "next" and become who God is calling us to be. This fall we will think about, dream about, build the foundation for, the next 250 years. What do we want this community of faith to be all about? What are we called to be and do? How do we continue serving the neighborhood we have served for so long and do so in ways that meet current and future needs? The

answer to these questions takes time, takes the voice of each of us and the commitment to show up, be present and be part of this occasionally messy life in community.

This can sometimes be uncomfortable, but it is also exciting—a gift—and I know this work is what we are called to do in Christ and because Christ has promised to be with us, in the midst of us, forming and formed by us, whenever 2 or 3 are gathered in his name, we are not in this alone and we are equipped, more than equipped with all we need. We can do this work, walk this journey because of Christ's promise of presence, because when we are gathered together in this community of faith and love, what we see, what we feel, what we know in one another is nothing less than the Risen Christ.