



I'm spiritual but not religious. I don't need a church. I can find God on my own by being in nature or meditating. Being in nature or meditating or any of the other, myriad individual spiritual pursuits can **feed** our faith. And can be a necessary part of enabling us to be in relationship with God. **Being in community, however, is where that faith gets lived out.** As one writer put it: **church is where we learn how to be human.** Where the rubber meets the road.

I've struggled for years with the last sentence of this morning's Gospel: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt. 18:20). But what about when I'm by myself – is Jesus not present? The sentence seems to suggest that. And if that's true, then what's all the fuss about a personal relationship with Jesus. In questioning this, a wise priest said that one interpretation does not necessarily exclude the other. Jesus is present when I'm by myself. Jesus is present but in a different way when two or three are gathered. Jesus being present to me – and my having an individual relationship with Jesus enables me to be part of the two or three that begin to constitute a community of the faithful.

In the Episcopal Church, a priest cannot celebrate the Eucharist by him- or her-self. There must be at least one other person present. This is because we are a community – not just individuals. ***The church is not me- the church is us. The church is not this or any other building- the church is the people of God.*** And that's part of what makes being the church – being the body of Christ - often difficult.

Being in community can be hard. We don't always – and perhaps not even most of the time – agree. St. Augustine is attributed with the principle: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." These days I'm not sure this principle has much sway over our common life. We can't even agree on what is an essential.

The National Sports Officials' website notes: "Every day in America and around the world, sports officials are physically and verbally harassed. Most incidents do not require police or medical assistance, but in some cases, the harassment turns violent. The fact that such behavior occurs at sporting events involving youth participants is appalling in itself, but the frequency in which these reports now occur is even more disturbing."<sup>1</sup>

Or alternatively, listen to the news about world events. Listen to the discussion about whether the United States should or should not bomb Syria – or put boots on the ground again in various places throughout our world. Or what about the continuing controversy in and around the event in Ferguson, Missouri? Whatever your feelings, beliefs and knowledge about what happened, we don't agree on how things should go forward.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.naso.org/sportsmanship/badsports.html> Sept. 3, 2011.

What has happened in our society that we seem to have gone so far astray from being able to live with consideration when we disagree with others? To be able to disagree without resorting to violence? And can we change the direction in which we appear to be headed – more incidents of violence and more extreme violence?

Jesus and Paul both give us guidelines that give us pause and ought to be the way we order our individual and our common life. From Paul we hear that we are to owe no one anything but love.

Paul does not mean that we can't take out a mortgage to buy a house or a car or another big ticket item that we can responsibly manage on our income. Rather, Paul means that our primary duty to one another is to respect each other as being created by God. If we respect one another, we treat each other, even when we disagree, as a child of God who is loved by God and thus to be loved by us. **Paul is not talking about love as an emotion but rather love as an attitude.**

When you love someone as an attitude, you care for them – for their well-being even when you disagree with their position. Jesus tells us when we believe a member of the church – a member of our community- has sinned that we have the obligation to approach that person, to alert them to our belief that he or she has sinned and to invite him or her to repent and be reconciled to the church – the community. And if your going to the other doesn't work to try again, this time with another member of the church. And if that doesn't work, to try again. This is not sanctimonious, "I'm better than you are; I'm judging you", but an action done with and in love, to restore a broken relationship.

And then Jesus says something interesting: "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" (Mt. 18:17). This is not about excommunicating or shunning such a person, although the verse has certainly been read that way. This is about keeping on reaching out to that person.

How many times did the religious establishment chastise Jesus for eating with sinners? With Gentiles? With tax collectors? Throughout his whole ministry, Jesus continued to reach out to those considered beyond the pale- those who sinned as understood by the customs of the day. So even though this verse seems to give us permission to throw someone out of our community of faith, I believe it really challenges us to keep on reaching out to that person. To continue to love that person even though we disagree with their actions. After all, actions speak louder than words – so if our actions are to keep reaching out to the person, perhaps in time that person will repent of the sin and seek to be reconciled to the community. And if that happens, we ought to rejoice as the shepherd did when the one lost sheep was returned to join the 99 that had stayed safely inside the fold.

No "Parking lot" conversations for Jesus. No speaking behind someone's back. No murmuring. No gossip.

Face the one with whom you have a disagreement – one on one. Don't go to someone else to complain about the other. Don't triangulate. It takes courage to speak directly to the one who has sinned, the one who has hurt you – whether deliberately or not. But part of our responsibility is to speak in love, always respecting the other as being created by God and worthy of love and dignity. When we conduct our lives with an attitude of love, we begin to create the beloved

community. The community which witnesses to Jesus the Christ, the only Son of God, the Lord, the Messiah. With love all things are possible.

Being human, if we take the instruction from Jesus seriously – to speak directly to the person in our community that we believe has sinned, we also have to accept that there may come a time when someone comes to speak to us. What will my attitude be when someone approaches me with a belief that I have acted in a way that shows disrespect for the community to which I belong?

Will I react in anger- maybe even in violence? Or will I remember these lessons from Paul and from Jesus. Owe no one anything but love. Treat all persons with respect and dignity even when we disagree most vehemently. Seek repentance and a return to community.

How many times shall I forgive, Peter asks Jesus. Seven times – after all, that’s the standard measure before Jesus. No, Jesus says. Seven times seventy. In other words, forgive as long as it takes until the relationship is restored.

We also know that failing to forgive hurts us- not the person that hurt us. We are the ones who retain the anger and bitterness. Have you ever had a situation and a conversation like this:

Someone hurt you either by saying something or doing something. You are angry but they don’t seem to care. You are having a hard time forgiving them and it makes you bitter or disillusioned. Finally, a time comes when you get up your courage and ask them why they hurt you. And you find out that they have no idea what you are talking about!

They don’t remember the incident or the words –and certainly didn’t mean to hurt you. And once you have had that conversation, and ask for forgiveness or offer forgiveness, your world somehow seems brighter and better. Keeping your hurt to yourself harms you- not the person you believe acted or spoke in a hurtful way. Keeping your hurt to yourself means the other person is likely to act or speak in a way that you may be hurt again. But having the courage to raise your hurt and to set the record straight about how you perceived what happened and what the other person perceived what happened may be the first step toward reconciling that relationship.

Failing to speak up when you are hurt can mean the loss of something that has been very special and important to you. How many times should you forgive: seven times seventy. However many times it takes to restore the relationship.

We know from sociologists or perhaps our own experience that violence breeds violence. Violence expressed escalates and escalates. And sooner or later someone is hurt and maybe even is killed. When this happens, Jesus weeps – and so should we.

In the Book of Common Prayer we have a Rite of Reconciliation *aka* “confession”. The Episcopal Church position is “none must, some should, all may.” There may be times in our lives when this is especially helpful to our souls. To intentionally acknowledge those areas where we fall short. To repent and to seek reconciliation. I particularly like the opening acknowledgment: “I confess to Almighty God, to his Church, and to you, that I have sinned by my own fault in thought, word, and deed, in things done and left undone. For these and all other sins which I cannot now remember, I am truly sorry. I pray God to have mercy on me. I firmly intend

amendment of life, and I humbly beg forgiveness of God and his Church, and ask you for counsel, direction, and absolution” (BCP 447).

And God always gives us counsel, direction and absolution. No matter the sin, God is always willing to listen when we confess our failings. God is always willing to have us rejoin the community of faith. Take these words to heart. Remember them especially when someone in our beloved community does something that hurts us. Owe no one anything but love. The most precious and meaningful gift that we can give is love. *Amen.*