

Life Together

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago
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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." - Matthew 18:15-20

Almighty God, you have so linked our lives one with another that all we do affects, for good or ill, all other lives: So guide us in the work we do, that we may do it not for self alone, but for the common good; and, as we seek a proper return for our own labor, make us mindful of the rightful aspirations of other workers, and arouse our concern for those who are out of work; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.** - The Collect for Labor Day, Book of Common Prayer, page 261

I'd like to see the picture or pictures come to your minds when you think of a mobile. Some of you might think of one that you've seen over a baby's crib. Or maybe you've stood under one of Alexander Calder's sprawling mobiles, at the National Gallery in Washington DC or at the Milwaukee Art Museum. Or maybe you've tried making a mobile yourself. You no doubt discovered how surprisingly hard it can be to get all of the individual parts in balance.

Getting all of the parts in balance is also a challenge where human beings are concerned. We come into the world and leave it alone, and many of us are feeling more alone than ever during this alienating time of pandemic. And yet, as if on a mobile, we are also profoundly interconnected with others, in our families, our neighborhoods, by virtue of hobbies or our places of work and those with whom we share faith and worship in the church.

One of my own inherent connections came to the fore last week at the end of a dinner I shared with a man I've known since I was ten years old. As we rose to leave, he sized me up, shook his head and said, "Just then, you were your father." We go through life with inseparable connections. Some are a blessing, as I experienced in that moment. Others may seem a curse.

Jesus clearly valued the integrity and sanctity of every individual human being. All four gospels are full of stories of those who come to Jesus, and to whom he responds, one by one by one: the Samaritan woman at the well, blind Bartimaeus, and even at the end, one of the two criminals crucified with him, to whom he promised Paradise. In these and so many instances, we see and appreciate the individuality of souls and circumstances and decisions and destinies.

Jesus also commonly addressed those who were drawn to him, those who followed him, in terms of their bond, together, in him, one with another. Our paths may include decisive individual moments, but the path of Christian faith is to be shared with others. Jesus urged his followers to be held together by their experiences of God's saving power, love and justice, by sharing the Good News of God in Christ, and by their care for one another. Jesus gave his followers a meal to share, a meal that gathered them around a common table, time and time again. And before that, he gave them the promise with which today's gospel teaching ends: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Chapter 18 of Matthew's gospel, from which today's appointed passage is taken, could be titled "Life Together." Here Jesus addresses what it means to be a believer and follower *alongside*

of other believers and followers. The underlying premise of Life Together is that to be a Christian, by definition, means to be connected to other believers and followers. St. Paul energetically endorses life together in today's passage from Romans: "... love one another with mutual affection ... hold fast to what is good ... take thought for what is noble in the sight of all ..." And more.

Elevated as all that may sound, Jesus makes clear in the gospel that life together can be messy. Jesus supposes a situation in the church where one member has sinned against another. This teaching takes for granted that even people who come together with devout faith and good intentions can and will hurt and fail and betray one another.

These inevitable sins among Christians in the church could be seen as a cause for cynicism. One could argue that the church is no better than any other human organization and that striving to build Christian community is not worth the inevitable problems. Or one might ask: 'Why fight human nature?' Our native, compromised instincts were well illustrated by Scott Peck in his once-best-selling book *The Road Less Travelled*: Our "capacity to confront, to say, 'I'm right, you're wrong, you should be different.' is one that many people have no difficulty exercising. Parents, spouses and people in various other roles do this routinely and casually, levelling criticisms right and left, shooting from the hip. Most such ... confrontation, usually made impulsively in anger or annoyance, does more to increase the amount of confusion in the world than the amount of enlightenment."

Peck's muse of more than 40 years ago, now seems more apt than ever. Alongside of the coronavirus pandemic, how many of us are succumbing in our own relationships and circumstances to behaviors and messages so routinely exercised and tweeted now in the political realm? We all risk infection by impulsive, aggressive shaming and by intentions to inflict harm. As our cultural pandemic degrades more and more of us, there is less and less recognition or appreciation for the mobiles that connect us. It's every man, woman and child for her or himself. It's kill or be killed, emotionally and spiritually if not literally.

By way of radical contrast with these mutually destructive ways of the world, Jesus views events of failure in a community as an opportunity. The strategy that he maps out in the event of one member sinning against another is meant to maximize the possibility of our revealing and exercising the reconciling love of God. "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." Notice that the intention of the confrontation is to "regain" the relationship with the other, to restore positive fellowship. And each of the successive steps that Jesus directs also has the same aim of reconciliation. The gospel text emphasizes that we are not to make only token efforts. Rather, we are to go to great lengths, to take extraordinary measures, in order to restore and maintain genuine unity with one another.

No doubt these intentions and values are counter-cultural. No doubt there is no one play-book for the exact hurts and broken relationships and shame that you and I have individually experienced. No doubt the practice of reconciliation is, in some ways, an art that has to be patiently and creatively cultivated by trial and error – if we are willing to explore it at all.

You or I may imagine that those with whom we share life in the church are brought together randomly, or that we are merely joined by affinity with the traditions or the architecture or the music. But what if we have been brought together by God's design? What if we have been intentionally placed together, as if on a divine mobile, created to show the world another way? What if the balance of that mobile relies on your willingness, and mine, to remain connected and to seek and practice reconciliation? How will we translate this teaching of Jesus for good on the mobiles that we share? *Amen.*