

The Matthew reading today finds Jesus talking about the things that can cause the foundation of the **ekklesia** ...the church....to crumble.

The church as an institution did not exist during Jesus' lifetime. We can believe that Jesus was talking about something that did not yet exist, but whose existence he could see in the future. Or, we could interpret Jesus' words as something Matthew used to speak to the community he was a part of...40 or 50 years after Jesus.

Either way, the point is the same. Jesus was saying that the life of faith was not a private matter. It was not something they/we can enjoy all by themselves. It was not about their personal relationship with God. It was also about their relationship to each other.

Jesus knew that their faith was best lived in community. That was when he promised to be with them; when they were gathered together in his name. Not when they were off doing their own thing...

Jesus had just told them the story about the shepherd who left the ninety and nine sheep to go after the one that was lost and bring it back to the fold. He seems to be continuing this story...this time focusing on the ninety-nine; Jesus was telling his friends they also need each other. They needed each other for all kinds of practical reasons, but they needed each other for spiritual reasons too.

Because as a flock, as a community, as a church, they would be so much more than the sum of their parts. And because they could not really love God unless they also loved each other. "I definitely love God, but you, I'm not so sure about.."

It seems that if Jesus could see the future creation of the Church, he could also see the forces that could split the Church apart.

In this passage he talks about the problems that come up when one member of the community sins against another, causes harm to another, and he offered a plan for solving the problem.

First, approach the person yourself, Jesus said, and see if you can work it out together. If that doesn't work, then take two or three others with you to join in the conversation.

And if that doesn't work, get the entire community involved. If that still doesn't work, then and only then, if you have carefully and prayerfully decided there is no other option, you might sever the relationship. Just know that whatever you do can have eternal consequences.

(Does anyone actually follow this?)

It doesn't mean it hasn't happened...but it can get tricky to tell who the sinner is, and who was the one sinned against.

Human relationships are rarely simply right and wrong, they are hardly ever that clearly defined. And whenever we're talking about people and sin, we're talking about conflicts that have a way of quickly escalating until there's some wrong on both sides. In the end it seems both have a part in the conflict. My Mom used to say, "I don't care who started it!"

Instead of talking directly to the person we have a problem with, we often start out by denying that there even is a problem.

We pretend the problem never happened. Instead of talking to the person who upset us, we talk About them. We either talk behind their backs, or we tell our problems to a third party. Most of us commit this sin.

That may make us feel better, but it does nothing to solve the original problem. We try to avoid the person we're upset with, or we make comments that question their character or their intentions.

And if that still doesn't work we resort to revenge. That may feel satisfying, but it won't do anything to solve the problem.

These may be some of the unhealthy ways we have learned to handle conflict in our families of origin, but Jesus said that those who wanted to be part of his family had to operate by different rules.

First, he put the onus on the victim to begin the conversation. That's not how we tend to think it should work. He seemed not at all interested in the question of who was right and who was wrong.

He was much more interested in getting the family, the community, back together again.

And only if you have tried everything you know how to try to restore that relationship and it still isn't working, if the doors to true communication are still closed against you, only then are you permitted to give up. "We are not to pretend that nothing has happened," writes Barbara Brown Taylor.

"We are to recognize that one of our members has left the family, because the only thing worse than losing a brother or sister is pretending that you haven't, and letting that person fester in your midst like an untended wound."

It would be so much easier to go our own ways. It would be so much easier if we weren't a faith community, if we weren't a family. It would be easier if we were just a loosely related bunch of individuals, more or less connected by some commonly held beliefs.

Writer Anna Carter Florence points out that we may have all made the same false assumptions about what Jesus said in this passage. She says we think it means, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name...then Kumbaya and all of that."

But she says, "I didn't realize that the backdrop to all this gathering was honest to God fighting. Somehow, that puts an entirely different spin on this passage. What does it mean to think that when two or three of us are fighting- he is there in the midst of us?"

Jesus started out by calling those twelve very different personalities to form a community around him, and he understood that they would always need each other, that their faith was not a private matter between them and God, but something they would need to work out together in a community.

But, as soon as they started arguing amongst themselves about which one of them would be the greatest in the kingdom, he knew they would always be arguing about something.

Maybe that's why he reminded them of these ancient rules from the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, about how to deal with conflicts in an honest and healthy way.

And maybe that's why he promised he would always be with them, even and maybe especially, in the midst of their conflicts because he understood that they would be wrestling with what it meant to live together in his name.

It's good to remember that our faith is not a private matter, but that we really need each other.

At its best, a congregation should be a place where we can belong, not just attend, where we are not just passing through, but connected enough to be known, with all our strengths and weaknesses, and cared for, whether we are right or wrong.

Maybe a congregation should be a gathering where we can find, not just comfort, but also challenges and encouragement.

Where we learn over and over that we really need each other --not just for practical reasons, but for spiritual ones as well. We are better when we are together.

Sometimes being together is a whole lot more work than going off in search of God on our own. (but we need to remind ourselves that time spent alone with God is never a bad thing.) Even in those times when being part of the Church is difficult, we have Jesus' guidance on how to approach our common life in healthy ways and we have his promise to be with us always, to be right there in our midst, even when we disagree with each other.

This is Jesus' teaching for the church, today, but is this a foreshadowing of the new heaven and the new earth? Does Jesus want us to get along with each other, now, and for the 'time to come?' Are we a community with God, or are we individually with God -on our own with God? Does it matter?

The hymn, "Joyful, Joyful We Adore You" offers a clue;

-verse 3,

*"...Source of grace and fount of blessing, let your light upon us shine,  
teach us how to love each other, lift us to the joy divine."*

Let us pray;   Amazing God,  
                  you sent Jesus to say,  
                          "Where two or more are gathered in my name,  
                          I am there, I am there."  
                  Thank you.