

I have never really understood the desire some people have to live in isolated and remote locations – to live far away from the hustle and bustle of communities. I have never looked longingly or jealously upon the Christian hermits of history who lived alone in isolated places, communing with God. For me getting out to the countryside or the wilderness is a challenge, I have always enjoyed the business and density of cities, just ask Bethany my wife, for whom the opposite is true. I think that my upbringing certainly comes into play, as I have spent the vast majority of my life living in large cities or the sub-burbs, but I think a large part of it is that in a busy city there is at least the illusion of community. I say illusion, because I know that in most cases, it is easier to find community in the small town settings of the country side, than the intense anonymity of the city, but I suppose I am comforted by the mere presence of people. And although I go through periods of introversion when I need to be alone, typically I enjoy the presence of people, I enjoy talking with people, laughing with people, working with people. While my dislike of isolated, remote and lonely places is rooted somewhat in the fear of how vulnerable being alone can make me, I think that it is also rooted in a desire deep down inside of me for community, for relationality for being in fellowship with fellow human beings. Participating in community makes you vulnerable too, to really enter into community with other people, you have to let them get to know you, the real you, you have to be willing to get hurt, you have to be willing be embarrassed, to be willing to share your sadness and your joys, your challenges and your successes. I think that the Church at its best embodies this sort of community, provides its members with a place of great security but also a place of great vulnerability. It is into this type of community that Jesus' words found in our Gospel reading today speak into.

Jesus intended for his follower's to be in fellowship with one another, just as they were in fellowship with him and He with his Father in heaven. Naturally whenever you have more than one person in relationship with one another, conflict and arguments will arise, mistakes will be made, people will be hurt. This is the nature of Jesus' words from the gospel of Matthew today, he addressed what a community should do in light of conflict. So let us listen again to his words:

“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 a [a brother or sister].”

In Jesus' words we see the intimacy of community at work. Conflict should be resolved privately if at all possible. Here Jesus isn't merely talking about any small conflict, but he uses the word sin, he uses sin to denote something bad or hurtful enough to have offended or hurt you enough. Jesus' response is merely to point out the sin in the hopes that the member will recognize, repent of it and that the two will be reconciled again. Reconciliation and fellowship are ultimate goals of community. But Jesus continues:

“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 offending member of the Church persists in their sin, if they refuse to seek reconciliation and forgiveness, Jesus recommends taking a small group of others, to see if they will be convinced by their words, and to ensure that the person who is has been wronged, is true in their accusation. Even here as the situation escalates, Jesus is recommending no punishment, no repercussions for the offenders sin, but Jesus suggests that grace should be continue to be offered, that forgiveness and reconciliation are still the primary goal of community. Jesus continues”

“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.”

With these words it seems that the conflict has finally reached its climax, if the offender continues to persist in sin, not recognizing their fault, then matter should be brought before the whole church, in the hopes that the offender will listen to the gathered weight and wisdom of the community. If the offender listens, there is reconciliation, there is forgiveness and fellowship is restored, the community can rejoice

that they have regained a brother or sister in Christ. If however the offender persists, this is where it seems Jesus' Grace reaches its limit, this is where it seems punishment comes, this is where it seems the weight of the offenders sin finally catches up to them. The church is to treat the offending member as a Gentile or a tax collector, two of the most reviled groups of Jesus' day. The part of us that relishes the punishment of other people, celebrates this, obviously this offender deserves to be punished, they didn't want to acknowledge their faults, they didn't seek to be reconciled or to accept forgiveness, despite being offered it three times, so obviously they deserve the punishment of losing fellowship of being sent away from the community for their sins? Right?

The Church today and over the centuries has been very good at this, very good at using this passage to justify the exclusion of persistent sinners or offenders from fellowship in the church. On the surface that is it would seem what Jesus is suggesting here. However, everything is not as it seems. While Jesus definitely suggests there is a break in community, and a change in relationship between the church and the offending sinner, Jesus is not giving his followers licence to shun and ostracize people who cause conflict, he is not giving the church licence to stop loving those people, and he certainly isn't giving the Church licence to hate them. Although Gentiles and tax collectors were reviled by first century Jews, I ask you how did Jesus treat them, how did Jesus interact with them? Instead of shunning and ostracizing tax collectors and sinners, he loved them, he ate and drank with them, he called them to be his followers, and he taught them and continued in fellowship with them. With these words Jesus was giving licence not to sever all ties with those people who offend and hurt us, but rather challenging us as community and as individuals to continue to offer them grace and love and forgiveness. To continue to walk with them, to eat with them, to hold them in prayer, and to strive for reconciliation. Jesus understood that if someone persisted in sin, the relationship would have to change, the persistent offender had made that choice for themselves; however Jesus was commanding his followers to something greater, Jesus was laying forgiveness as the foundation of his Church, forgiveness even for the gravest offenders.

I wonder what the Church at large would look like if we took Jesus' radical words of radical forgiveness to heart. Who are the people that we know who have persisted in sin? Who are the people who have persisted in refusing to see their fault, who have persisted in injuring and offending us or the church? Who are the people who we have run out of the church, who we have decided were too much trouble or were just too far gone to be reconciled? I am certain that we can all think of people that fit the bill, we can all think of people that have been pushed out or excluded by our own actions or those of the wider Church? Do we treat them like outcasts, do we ignore them, do we scare them off?

And so how do we begin to treat them as Jesus has called us to treat them, how God as treated us? I think we begin by seeking forgiveness of our own. We begin by acknowledging the hurt and offense we have caused by our own actions seeking at the very least some reconciliation from that. And even if those people choose not to acknowledge their faults, Jesus calls us to love them anyways, to pray for them, to eat and drink with them, to laugh with them, to support them, to play with them, whatever it takes to maintain fellowship with them, in the hopes that reconciliation may come. In the face of persistent sin and offence, Jesus calls us to our form of persistence: persistent love. Persistent love and forgiveness that knows no end, no bounds, just as God has been persistently loving and forgiving to us. It is no coincidence that immediately following this passage in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells Peter that he must forgive 7-times 70, which was a Jewish saying that meant infinitely.

And so today, I challenge us all to love persistently, to forgive persistently. I challenge us all to pray for someone who has offended us, and not just pray that they would see the error in their ways, but to pray that God would bless them, to pray that God would show them his continual love and mercy, to pray that they may know they are beloved children of God. As we embrace Jesus' call to persistent love and forgiveness, then I believe we will truly understand what it means to be a community. And for that I say thanks be to God!