

23rd Sunday OT
Matthew 18:15-20

Community Discourse

The fourth Discourse of Matthew is often entitled the *Community Discourse*. It begins with defining the greatest in the kingdom; it is the one 'who makes himself **a child**.' It underlined the value of such **a little one** by the parable of the lost sheep. Ninety-nine can be left on the hillside least one be lost. It then addresses the question on how to deal with the brother who sins.

Jesus lays down **three stages**. The first is to follow the example of Jesus and Peter and deal with the matter in private. If this fails, bring in two or three others. Only at the third stage is **the whole community** to be brought in. We can compare directions given in the Law. The individual is given responsibility which is not shifted immediately to higher authority. If all fails, then the sinner is to be treated like a gentile and a tax collector. We seem to have a formula for excommunication from the community.

But the rest of Matthew's gospel makes us pause. **The parable of the lost sheep** stresses the worth of the lost one. Jesus himself was called the friend of tax collectors and sinners. We still have to read the parable of the unforgiving debtor about the refusal to forgive by one who has been forgiven much. The decision of the community does not exhaust the mercy of God.

The community does not live by itself. God is ready to make its decisions his own. God listens to and answers the petitions of even two of them. When they come together in his name, then Jesus is among them. He is the Emmanuel who will be with them until the end of time. He continues to challenge his Church with the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount and the other discourses of this gospel.

I believe the bottom line is **dialogue** at all levels. Never end the dialogue even when it seems your side is getting the shorter stick, so to speak. Especially keep up the dialogue at beginning before things get out of hand, before the issue divides the community. And always trust in the Holy Spirit. This wonderful person of the Trinity has sometimes been taken lightly in the history of the Church, probably because of the lack of understanding of the Holy Spirit's role in the Trinity.

The Holy Spirit has been called many things, like Wisdom of God, or Spirit of God, or even recently the Love Child of the Trinity. And the Holy Spirit is often referred to as a '**she**' to balance or counter the male images of the other two persons of the Trinity, Father and Son. However, the Holy Spirit, no matter how nebulous she might seem, is still a person and is alive and very active in the church. This person of the Trinity is seen most active in the bigger picture, watching over the Church as a whole throughout the world but also on the local level, at the parish level, and especially the many small faith communities that make up many parishes.

The reason I am taking this time to talk about the Holy Spirit is that when there is division of any kind with in the community, large or small as today's gospel writes, the Holy Spirit is active to heal or bring together again any faith community. The devil divides, in Greek, "**Diaballo**," to accuse, to split in two. The Holy Spirit unites, "**Symballo**," to meet, discuss, to unite. When there is division in community whose side are we on? Are we working to unite the community? That is always the question we should ask ourselves, are we uniting or dividing? Is any single issue that great or important that we allow it to divide us? Is any single issue that great or important that we cannot work it out so as not to divide us?

Within our traditions, there are capitol "**T**" and there are small "**t**" traditions. A small 't' tradition would be **language**, like the issue between using English or Latin in our liturgy. Jesus really used neither, since most scholars believe he spoke Aramaic and knew Temple Hebrew, since the Hebrew Language of the past was no longer a living language, just as Church Latin was no longer a living language. Capitol "**T**" Tradition would be our Catholic belief in the **real presence of Christ** in the Eucharist's Bread and Wine. If it became an issue, which one would you fight over to the point of division, language or real presence of Christ in the Eucharist?

At what point does such division go against charity to our fellow Christian? How do we respectfully and charitably support an issue important to us, such as the many issues that divide the Church today, such as Women Issues concerning Church Leadership, Marriage and Divorce Issues, LGBT – however many letters of the alphabet you want to add on – Issues, Latin Mass vs Vatican II Liturgy, to mention a few. What would Jesus say or do? How would one be different if you would be in that other person's shoes? Certainly a family member or loved one has brought up the issue. These issue are not going away and will more than likely multiply.

There is one thing more: What position would a Marina Church take on any issue? Like the Scriptures, “She pondered all these things in her heart!” It doesn’t get any better than that, Ponder all these things in your heart.