

This reading forms a very practical lesson, a spiritual discipline, a promise and realisation that God is indeed with us, and how we actually need a church community. And this lesson is directed at the church.

Matthew is the only one of the four Gospel recorders who mentions the term 'church' [Gk. ecclesia]. And as Matthew is recording his account for a Jewish Christian congregation, with the thematic focus of the spiritual transformation of the community into the Kingdom of Heaven, we might then read and understand these instructions to air the frustrations as both practical and spiritual.

God's will for the church is that we are a family, living together by the Spirit. We are not expected to always be of one mind, we are not expected to always agree on a course of action. However, we are expected to live by the Holy Spirit and recognise the presence of God in our midst. It is hard to recognise the presence of the Holy Spirit in someone else if we refuse to meet together, or pray together. If we are never present with another, how can we see and discern what God is doing? How can we hear their story?

Do we rely on second or third hand information?

Do we base our understanding on hearsay or gossip?

Do we truly put our trust that the other is living in the Spirit of God?

After the lesson he gives, Jesus says he is present when two or three gather in his name. Why? Because we see Christ in the other person.

The truth, the Good News, the Gospel is that if we aren't living in the Spirit, then we aren't seeing Christ in the other. If we aren't experiencing the Fruit (love, joy, peace, patience, etc) then we aren't going to be seeing the presence of God in the other.

Because there is a cost to the community that the disagreements that we have with each other as individuals, threaten community life. If one of us sins against another, then bringing the whole community in requires the whole court to make a judgement that threatens the integrity of how the community lives together. There is a cost of putting so much weight behind a decision that it threatens to throw us off balance, it changes the relationship that the whole community has with one if not both individuals.

Yet, we should also realise that this can be restored through the grace of God, through the mercy that we show, and the forgiveness that we offer. But there is a cost.

The cost is that the work of the community is distracted. Our energy and attention must be brought in to weigh upon it – we are distracted by our internal machinations rather than the outward looking work of bringing good news to the poor.

So what is the spiritual discipline that Jesus is teaching us? It is that we must be willing to meet together, to settle our grievances. The discipline is that we might not always want to.

When we do meet, we need to be searching for how God is present in the other person. Because God is there. God is with us.

When we seek to be within the Kingdom of Heaven, within this realm of spiritual wholeness, we decide to resolve our differences, live in peace, and the community continues to be bound. When we can't live in peace and resolve our differences we loosen the bounds that hold us together and the community separates. What we bind on earth is bound in heaven – not just or necessarily in the future but the kingdom of heaven that we experience now. What is loosed by us is loosed in the kingdom of heaven in the now.

So let us ask God to reveal his presence in the work he calls us to be a part of, to be in community. Let us spend or time in prayer for and with those who rub us the wrong way, who disagree with us and cause us to seek out offering forgiveness and resolution, listening and hearing what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Matthew 18:15-20 (NRSV from bible.oremus.org)

Reproving Another Who Sins 18:15 '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. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If 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. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, 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. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'