

To me, this Gospel passage is all about “fraternal correction.” This chapter in Matthew is called the discourse on the nature of the church. This is one of only two times in the Gospel that Jesus uses the word *ekklēsia*, the Greek word for church or assembly. Today we hear Jesus’ instructions to his young church leaders on what to do when one of their brothers sins against them.

It's important to read this passage in light of the whole chapter. Jesus is speaking to the men who left their former lives behind and travel with him every day. Here he's talking about conflicts within the apostles and the process of fraternal correction in his Church. He's not talking about two siblings in a family.

His three-step process for dealing with conflict or sin within this community of brothers is: First - individual brotherly correction. Never easy - then and now. If that fails, you “take one or two others along with you.” It's like legal language from Deuteronomy - and Jesus makes it standard practice. If that doesn't work, “tell it to the church,” referring to the authoritative leaders of the church. When that doesn't work, what's the penalty? Treat him like a Gentile or a tax collector.

Well, that's a first century Jewish way of saying: treat him like he's cut off from communion with the body of disciples. In ancient Judaism, two kinds of people were cut off from communion with temple worshipers. Gentiles and tax collectors were publicly excommunicated because of their sinfulness. That sounds harsh. I thought Jesus was inclusive! I thought his message was one of reconciliation! And it is! But it's also one of repentance from sin. Jesus knows better than anyone that sin damages relationships, and it damages the community. Everywhere in the Gospels, repentance from sin is a big part of Jesus' message. But, he also loved to bring tax collectors, gentiles and sinners back into communion with him.

With that perspective, we can understand the next verse.

Jesus gives the same teaching authority, the authority to make doctrinal judgments, the authority to reconcile us through the sacrament of confession, and the same disciplinary power, not just to Peter like we heard 2 weeks ago, but to the other apostles as well. The successors to the Apostles get their authority from Jesus in Matthew 18. Only Peter has the keys of the kingdom. Others participate in that authority, but not with the same fullness that Peter himself has.

The last two verses frequently get taken out of context. People say “well, if two Christians agree on anything and they pray about it, then it should happen.” Well no, that's not exactly what Jesus is getting at here. He's talking to the apostles about the authority that they have, and here he's describing the power of prayer of his apostles when two or more agree and pray to God. That is a particularly powerful form of prayer, like the prayer of bishops at an ecumenical council. The successors of the apostles, like at Vatican II, gathered together to pray and to make binding decisions for the Church on matters of faith and morals, as well as matters of discipline, because Jesus has given them a special authority within the Church.

That doesn't mean we can't apply Jesus' words to the special power of Christians praying together and asking the Lord for something in union with one another. There is always more power in prayer when it is done in community.

But in its original context, this passage is about how the apostles, united in prayer, can make binding decisions for the Church. Specifically, decisions about those who may have sinned against the Church and need to be called to repentance, and maybe even need to be cut off from the Church for a time so that they might turn from their sin and be reintegrated into the Church. That is always the desired result of excommunication, then and now. Because whoever the Church receives back into communion, God

will welcome back into his. Reconciliation with the Church is the same as reconciliation with God.

My prayer is that our bishops in Rome and around the world, re-read this gospel in its original context, and get to work on some fraternal correction with the hundreds of clergy who publicly contradict church teaching, along with plenty of financial crooks and sexual predators within the church hierarchy.

So, if this gospel is about fraternal correction among our pope and bishops, it sounds like we're off the hook, right?

No. Our Old Testament reading from Ezekiel is about our obligation to engage in correction of our brothers and sisters, which is incredibly difficult in our current climate of relativism. Any attempt to correct someone - especially in matters of religious faith or practice - is seen as judgmental. It's almost completely taboo. But not in the Bible. The prophet Ezekiel is very serious about our obligation to correct one another when it comes to matters of sin, and also in matters of truth and justice. Especially among our families or friends, who can often be the most difficult. We have to recognize that if someone sins against us, there needs to be that same process of reconciliation, always with truth and charity in mind. It never involves the internet and social media!

The current individualistic idea of sin is that "well I can just go straight to God, I don't need the Church." That was not Jesus' form of Christianity. Jesus's instruction to the apostles would make no sense if that were the case. The only way to make sense of Matthew 18 is if Jesus is founding one church on the Apostles, and that he presumes communion with one church. The church that comes down to us through the pope and the bishops, the successors of the apostles. That's why our Creed mentions not just the Catholic Church, but the apostolic Church, the Church that goes back to Peter and the apostles. Amen?

- Deacon Jack Schaefer