

Two or three can resolve conflicts

TO RESOLVE a conflict, what should a Christian do? "Turn the other cheek" (Mt. 5:39) is a response many people suggest. "Punch the other's cheek" is the response many people give. However, next Sunday's Gospel (18:15-20) give a very different answer: Work it out. Jesus offers a much more nuanced solution to fighting. It's more difficult than managing cheeks.

This advice appears in the fourth great discourse of Matthew's Gospel. The Gospel highlights five speeches by Jesus, beginning with the Sermon on the Mount. The fourth speech concerns Church life, how to live in community. Peter and other close followers of Jesus listen in.

The particular topic Jesus proposes in this passage is a painful one: conflict within the community. The disciples have had to receive plenty of advice on how to handle conflict from outside the community. After all, they would suffer persecution after the death of Christ. But here lies a problem much more insidious than enemies outside the camp. Members within the community don't get along. Now what?

JESUS ABANDONS the advice most people remember: turn the other cheek. The community does not need silence; it needs reconciliation. Since the offense comes from within a community that should be acting in unison, Jesus does not advise them to non-directive, non-violent gallantry. He urges people to work out their problems.

Jesus presents a threefold vision of attempts to resolve a conflict. First, go to the offender, one on one. Not getting anywhere? Get a couple of other community members to go along to make an intervention. Maybe the three of you can get where you couldn't alone. Still no luck? Then bring the case to the whole community or, in Matthew's words,

"to the Church." If the offender *still* won't change after all that, give up. Don't slug it out. Don't argue till you're blue in the face. Get out. Forget it. Treat the offender like a Gentile or a tax collector — like an outsider or a traitor. Get on with life.

Where did Jesus come up with such practical advice? He read the Bible. Check out Leviticus 19:17 for "You shall reprove your neighbor." And Deuteronomy 19:15 for "Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained."

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THE NEW TESTAMENT letters treat the same theme. Paul says, "If anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness" (Gal 6:1). Or again, "After a first and second admonition, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions" (Titus 3:10). The Letter of James offers a reward for good conflict resolution: "If anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" (5:19-20).

The concept of going to the Church for advice is a unique contribution. It reveals the early Christian community's nascent organization. No leader renders a judgment; the community as a whole works it out on their own. Only twice in Matthew's Gospel do we find the word "church" at all: here (18:17), and a couple chapters earlier (16:18), where Jesus promises Peter that "upon this Rock I will build my church."

By giving the community the authority to bind and loose, Jesus promises that its decision will be honored in heaven. Some decisions will reconcile the offender; others will fail. But since the community acts with the power of Christ, the judgement of the Church will reflect the judgement of God.

Wherever two or three are gathered, Jesus said, he is there among them. Frequently, we assume he meant when two or three are gathered in prayer. But in the context of this passage, we realize with comfort that Christ is also present in decision-making. Whenever two or three gather to resolve conflicts, Christ is there. □

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Daily Scripture Readings

Twenty-Second Sunday

In Ordinary Time
Sunday, September 1

Jeremiah 20:7-9
Psalm 63: 2-6, 8-9
Romans 12:1-2
Matthew 16:21-27

Monday, September 2

1 Corinthians 2:1-5
Psalm 119: 97-102
Luke 4:16-30

Tuesday, September 3

1 Corinthians 2:10b-16
Psalm 145: 8-14
Luke 4:31-37

Wednesday, September 4

1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Psalm 33:12-15, 20-21
Luke 4:38-44

Thursday, September 5

1 Corinthians 3:18-23
Psalm 24:1-6
Luke 5:1-11

Friday, September 6

1 Corinthians 4:1-5
Psalm 37:3-6,
27-28, 37-40
Luke 5:33-39

Saturday, September 7

1 Corinthians 4:6b-15
Psalm 145: 17-21
Luke 6:1-5

Twenty-Third Sunday

In Ordinary Time
Sunday, September 8

Ezekiel 33:7-9
Psalm 95: 1-2, 6-9
Romans 13:8-13
Matthew 18:15-20

