

They tell a story of a pastor who became sick, ended up in the hospital and missed a parish council meeting. Two days later he opened an envelope at his hospital bed and found a card that read, "Dear Fr. Smith, we voted 5-4 and decided to send you this card. Get well soon. Signed, the Parish Council."

In theory this would never happen here, because we ask all of our councils to reach their decisions not by a vote but by consensus, by the agreement of all. We want people to come to the council meetings well-informed but open to changing their minds. We think the best decision is not the one that gets the most votes but the one that everyone can agree to. Our process of reaching decisions by consensus takes more time, but it avoids the factionalizing of the councils and rewards a spirit of cooperation.

Today's passage from the Letter to the Ephesians tries to get the Christian community to act like a community. Hard to believe, but there were people in the early church who didn't get along. The Letter to the Ephesians tried to correct this. It says all bitterness, fury, anger, shouting and reviling must be removed, along with all malice, and that people should be kind to one another, compassionate, and forgiving. All this advice relates to interpersonal relationships. It's not about one's own failure or the discipline for success -- it's all about getting along.

The letter gives several reasons why people should get along. Today's passage opens with the plea, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God." The Spirit lives within the community, and if you offend another member of the community, you grieve the Holy Spirit.

Then the letter says you should forgive as God has forgiven you. This reverses the petition in the Lord's Prayer. In that prayer we ask God to look at the way we forgive other people and to forgive us accordingly. Here, the letter exhorts Christians to forgive others because God has forgiven us first.

Finally, Ephesians says the reason we should get along is to be imitators of God. Christ loved us and handed himself over for us, and we should imitate that kind of love for others as well.

The consensus decision-making process we use at St. Regis is not perfect. It does not completely eliminate disagreement within our community. But it acknowledges the importance of kindness and compassion. Today we hear a good reminder about how our relationships should go, especially when we're dealing with other Christians. All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting and reviling must be removed, along with all malice. Let us be kind to one another and compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven us in Christ.