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St. Pius X Church
Middletown, CT

23rd Sunday

September 6, 2020

“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20)

Ezekiel 33: 7-9

Psalm 95

Romans 13: 9-10

Matthew 18: 15-20

Six months ago, as we approached the Season of Lent, we might have been thinking about change. What can I do to make this the “best Lent ever” as Matthew Kelly likes to say. Should I give up something like chocolate, or should I do something extra, like go to daily Mass? No one could foresee the coronavirus storm that was brewing on the horizon that would bring tremendous change, albeit not the change we had in mind. Life’s routines have changed, and people’s lives are filled with uncertainty and anxiety. In scientific terms, change means movement, movement creates friction, and friction creates heat. Sometimes that heat causes hard feelings, yes, even in the Christian community.

Today, we hear the first of two installments from the “community discourse” in St. Matthew’s gospel, chapter 18. It’s a prime example of what led people to call St. Matthew’s Gospel, the “Gospel of the Church”. Today’s Gospel relates a three-part procedure for dealing with difficult individuals. Anyone who thinks that the church had an “ideal” existence in its early days, needs to take a closer look at the scriptures and history. Anyone surprised by contemporary disagreements in parishes and dioceses should remember that **every** church community in every locality, and in every century has faced the challenge of gathering **real** diverse individuals. God’s church is made up of saints and sinners, neurotics, the sick, the frail, and the weak; and they’re not all just sitting in the pews! The Church always needs to keep Jesus’ words, as described in Chapter 18, in mind as we face the inevitable conflicts that arise. Patience, courage, prudence, and trust are needed to live in a less than perfect church, in a less than perfect world.

Pope St. John Paul II tried to make the turn of the millennium a time of reconciliation. He was especially bothered by the historic split between the East and the West – the “Great Schism”. He saw it as the greatest scandal of the gospel. He wanted the closing years of the previous millennium to be a time of joyful renewal of our Christianity, a time of unity and reconciliation. One of the first things that Pope Francis did was to organize the “Year of Mercy” to make us aware of the need for reconciliation with God and one another. Not everyone was happy with the fact the Pope apologized for the many failings of the Church over the centuries – especially the sex abuse scandal. At least it reminds us that the Church is not without its conflicts.

All of this isn’t easy because we live in a contentious society, in a contentious world, at a contentious time. It is so hard to live a serene life in a peaceful world. We fight about everything and sue at the drop of a hat. None of this is new to the Church. We had our first squabbles in the days of Peter and Paul over whether converts to Christianity had to first become Jews, and follow their laws, before becoming Christians. The result was the First Council of Jerusalem, a forum for prayerful dialogue which settled the dispute. It comes back to Matthews’s experience of church.

The Church is made up of saints and sinners. There's always been discord and there probably always will be, at least until the Lord comes in Glory. That's why we have purgatory.

Today's celebration can help us to be more aware that we, the Church, are a living body, united by our communion in Christ, present among and gathered here in his name. Through the Eucharist we commit ourselves to one another. We pray for one another, saints and sinners, and especially for those who are going through a difficult time and those with whom we might be in conflict or find hard to forgive. We pray for patience, prudence, courage, and trust.

Our parish peace pole is an on-going symbol of our desire for peace and reconciliation amongst ourselves. Over the past few years, it was a Pokémon destination. But more importantly, I've noticed people out there from time to time. I've had a few conversations with others there myself. Unfortunately, someone stole the benches, so the conversations have to happen standing. At a time when we're living life in a pressure cooker, it's a great place to pray that the change that creates friction will create more light than heat.