

# *Communities of Practice: Life Together*

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*By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who know that the way we behave toward one another is the fullest expression of what we believe.*

—from “Eight Points of Progressive Christianity,” #4

## **Ancient Witness:** Matthew 18:15-18

*[Jesus said] “If your sister or brother should commit some wrong against you, go and point out the error, but keep it between the two of you. If he or she listens to you, you have won a loved one back. If not, try again, but take one or two others with you, so that every case may stand on the word of two or three witnesses. If your sister or brother refuses to listen to them, refer the matter to the church. If she or he ignores even the church, then treat that sister or brother as you would a Gentile and a tax collector.\* The truth is, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will be released in heaven.”*

(\*These regulations were developed by the ancient community after Jesus died, no doubt, in order to deal with divisive behavior. The most extreme response sounds quite severe unless we remember Jesus’ own view of tax collectors and Gentiles who were outside the worshiping community and yet loved and fully embraced by God. —SVK )

In Tibetan Buddhism the new Dharma student makes a commitment to wakefulness in the rite called a Refuge Ceremony by affirming the Three Jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha or spiritual community. They recite the Refuge Prayer:

*I go for refuge in the Buddha, the enlightened teacher; I commit myself to enlightenment;  
I go for refuge in the Dharma, the spiritual teaching; I commit myself to the truth as it is;  
I go for refuge in the Sangha, the spiritual community; I commit myself to living the enlightened life.*

What I want you to see is that being part of a spiritual community is an essential part of the spiritual quest. It is an indispensable part of the path. In the sometimes mundane, sometimes frustrating, sometimes annoying and messy life together, we grow and develop our spiritual selves. Living together is part of our practice. Just about all the religious traditions seem to say this.

Jesus affirmed the power of the sangha: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I shall be.” As a spiritual community of fellow seekers we can trust, it is also a sign of our commitment to live harmoniously with others, of our inter-connectedness, and of the positive energy and support that we all need.

And so it is within the sangha or church that we follow what the Buddhists call the 8-fold path of wisdom, ethics and meditation. And I’m highlighting in particular our ethical life together—right speech, right action and right livelihood.

Right speech is to use words to help, not harm. Jesus said that we tend to notice the small imperfection in someone else’s eye while overlooking the log sticking out of our own. This is similar to a Tibetan proverb: “Don’t notice the tiny flea in the other person’s hair and overlook the lumbering yak on your own nose!” So we avoid judgmental words in our life together.

When Jesus said, “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” he wasn’t saying was that we don’t evaluate or even challenge behavior of others. We still make ethical decisions. But the word “judge,” *krino* in the Greek, is more like “to pass judgment,” “to pass sentence” or “to condemn.” So it is more like “Do not condemn or you will be condemned.”

Now this is very close to the meaning of that famous story told by John about the woman caught in adultery, when John's Jesus says, "Let those without sin cast the first stone." One by one the people drop their stones and leave. Then Jesus says, according to John, "neither do I *condemn* you."

Much of Jesus' ministry was countering people who thought they knew the Truth and who were going to be enforcers of the Truth, those who thought they were "without sin" and had perfect understanding, which gave them the right to stone others and condemn others and pass judgment upon others, including, sadly, even Jesus, himself. "Do not condemn; do not throw stones," said Jesus.

Robert Fulgum in his classic book, *All I Ever Really Needed to Know*, said that what we really need to know is not really to be found in universities or the great institutions of higher learning, or with corporate think-tanks, or with governmental bureaucrats. All we need to know was taught to us in kindergarten as children.

*Share everything.*  
*Play fair.*  
*Don't hit people.*  
*Put things back where you found them.*  
*Clean up your own mess.*  
*Don't take things that aren't yours.*  
*Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.*  
*Wash your hands before you eat.*  
*Flush.*  
*Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.*  
*Live a balanced life—learn to think some*  
*and draw and paint and sing and dance*  
*and play and work every day some.*  
*Take a nap every afternoon.*  
*When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic,*  
*hold hands, and stick together.*  
*Be aware of wonder.*

All we really need to know is both simple and mysterious. And so it is with the church.

That there is conflict in the church may disappoint us, but it certainly should not surprise us. This has disappointed many people, and there are those who have even left the church disillusioned with all the fighting and carrying on. The church, after all, is a human institution and is subject to the same weaknesses and shortcomings as any other human community.

Jesus preached to his community of followers as people who would have strong differences, as people who would constantly have to forgive each other. Not seven times but "seventy times seven." The question for Jesus was not *if* the community would experience conflict within itself and with the world. But the question was for him *how would it deal with its conflict and anger*. Paul would later write to one of these communities: "Go ahead and be angry, but do not sin." Jesus did not expect those who followed him to be inhuman or above the fray. But Jesus did hold up a standard for how to deal with feelings of anger and with conflict.

So the church is far from perfect, but there is something about the community of faith which can be (and sometimes is) a model to the rest of the world of how to deal with conflict. It is not a group which professes to be without sin or without anger or without fighting. But the congregation can demonstrate by example how to reconcile division and resolve disputes. The spiritual community can provide glimmers and rays of light in a world sometimes enveloped by darkness.

And as people of faith, sometimes *how* we say things, sometimes *how* we take a stand, is more important than *what* we say or *what* stand we take. Sometimes our most effective witness to the world around us is *how* we behave, how we treat each other, and the process of making decisions rather than the decisions themselves.

Today we have some basic principles about how followers of Jesus are to deal with differences among themselves. These principles were passed on to us from Matthew. He listed three steps for dealing with any kind of complaint against another person.

First, one is to go immediately, directly and personally to the individual with whom one has a difference. We are not to hide, ignore or cover up our differences.

Notice that the victim who feels wronged is to take the initiative. There is no room in this teaching for grudges or passive-aggressiveness like pouting. One cannot always avoid being a victim, but one can avoid the victim mentality.

In the church we are responsible for up building one another as a church, and the concern is upon the spiritual well-being of the other. Notice a few things about how to initially deal with someone who has hurt us.

- 1.) It is done in private. "If another member wrongs you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone."
- 2.) The expression "win back" shows that what matters is the other. "If the member listens to you, you have regained that one."
- 3.) The feelings are not either kept to oneself where they are stored up and fester, or they are not told to anyone else. I am responsible for my own anger, whenever I have it. "Do not let the sun go down on your anger," Paul would write.

The goal is love, forgiveness and reconciliation; and that is what the followers of Jesus are about.

About 30 years ago I met with one of the ministers of a large, conservative church in Cincinnati because I admired how they handled conflict in their church. (Yes, I think we can learn things from conservative sisters and brothers.) He wrote:

*We are committed to two related concepts—that of the "clean slate" principle and the "good report" principle. The essence of these agreements is that in the event of any feeling of hurt or animosity that we might have toward one or the other members of the staff, we will take immediate action steps to share the nature of our feelings and to resolve them with the person—that is, to "clean the slate." Asking forgiveness is often a corollary to this principle. The "good report" principle indicates that I will not give or receive a bad report on any other member of the staff. If someone else approaches me with a bad report concerning a staff colleague, (or for that matter any other member of the body) I will immediately ask the person not to proceed with their report to me and call them to go to the individual involved and share their concern. I will further hold them accountable to do so. It would be hard to overstress the importance of the two principles. (Richard Towner, College Hill Presbyterian Church)*

Then, if the problem is not resolved between the two persons together and it is needed, the two can reach out to one or two appropriate persons to work together with them to resolve their dispute. Often, if there isn't resolution the two parties will simply agree to disagree, and it would end with the private discussion. It is rare for it to go beyond this, and most issues simply don't need to involve others for arbitration. But if there is, it is the sort of arbitration in which a few loved and loving, respected members help to restore broken relationships.

Then, only *after* these direct, private dealings fail that the church, the corporate fellowship, is brought into play. Notice that it isn't to random individuals but to the appropriate channels. Reconciliation is the goal, and each person has responsibility in it. We are responsible for our own anger and for reconciling with others. We are responsible for cleaning our own slate. And when we do this, the whole community, the system, is strengthened.

Family and systems therapists refer to this as triangulation. And you could say that these ancient guidelines say, "Don't triangulate, and don't let yourself be pulled into a triangle."

Open criticism, negative gossip is never appropriate. Critical statements, allegations, accusations to the public, to people who are not in position to help change the situation, are never appropriate. It not only undermines a fair process and hurts the other person, it is destructive to the whole community and tears it down. It is divisive.

The Buddha, also, specifically instructed his followers to avoid gossip and triangulation.

I've read that the insight meditation teacher, Joseph Goldstein, as an awareness exercise, would sometimes ask his students to refrain from saying anything about anyone who isn't present. No talking about people who annoy you as well as not talking about people who enthrall you. No dissecting anyone else's problems or behavior, good or bad, unless the person you are talking about is there to hear what you say. An exercise like this can be very helpful in self awareness, and so what impeccable speech can do is help us start to unravel the cocoon of ego.

Now sometimes people feel that they need to let their friends "blow off steam," and that it is their duty to "be supportive" and let them dump a load of garbage on them. But that's not being supportive, because the moment it happens, all three parties are hurt and diminished: the one being talked about, the listener who has a diminished view of that person, and the talker who has been enabled to behave in this way. And so whenever bad stories are spread or gossip is spread, *the listeners bear responsibility, too.*

We all know that truth is best served by a fair and due process. And in these words in Matthew 18, truth is the secondary issue. The primary issue is kindness. It is building up others.

Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist monk and author, wrote,

*For a community to be a real place of practice or worship, its members have to cultivate mindfulness, understanding and love. A church where people are unkind to each other or suppress each other is not a true church.*

In Matthew, Jesus speaks this reality when he says, "Before you offer your gift at the altar, first be reconciled with your brother or sister." In other words, to truly worship we cannot "write off" each other, but we must practice kindness.

It's not just our gift that we have to offer, but *how* we offer it that's important. I will end with a familiar story that is so appropriate:

*Once there was a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Some of the younger monks had left in dissatisfaction, and no new men were joining. There were but a handful of monks and their leader, the abbot, remaining. They began fighting among themselves, each blaming the hard times on the faults and failings of the other.*

*One day a traveling rabbi stopped at the monastery for a night's rest. He ate, and prayed alongside the other monks. The next day, as the rabbi prepared to continue on his journey, the abbot drew him aside. He told him of the problems of the monastery and asked him for his observations and for some advice to share with the other monks.*

*Upon hearing the abbot's woes, the rabbi was quiet for some time.*

*"Cannot you give me some advice to help my monastery to thrive again?" the abbot begged.*

*"Your monks will not listen to my advice," the rabbi replied. "But perhaps they would benefit from an observation. The Messiah dwells among you here at the monastery."*

*"One of us?" asked the abbot astonished. "Which one?"*

*"Oh, that I cannot say," he answered. "Share this with your brothers, and in time it shall be revealed to you."*

*The abbot thanked him and sent him on his way. He then gathered the monks together, who listened in amazement to the news.*

*“One of us! But who?” each on asked out loud. Then to themselves they wondered, “It couldn’t be Brother Robert—or could it?”*

*“Surely not Brother Henry, but there are times when...”*

*“Not the youngest, well maybe...”*

*“The abbot himself?”*

*“Could it be me?”*

*Soon things began to change at the monastery as each began to see the Messiah in the other and to hear the Messiah’s words in each word spoken.*

*Soon people began to wander back to the monastery, and in time new men joined and the monastery thrived.*

Friends, the way we behave sometimes says more about us than our proclamations. Let us remember, the Messiah dwells among us here—in our very midst.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*

**Call to Commitment:** from the movie, *Bambi*

*“Thumper.”*

*“Yes, Momma.”*

*“What did your father tell you this morning?”*

*“If you can’t say something nice, don’t say nothing at all.”*