

23 Sunday A

September 6, 2020

St. Patrick

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St. Matthew's Gospel begins today with a clear instruction on how to resolve conflicts and disagreements: **"If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone."**

**"...when the two of you are alone."**

Yes, of the three times the word "church" is used in the four Gospels, it's used twice in today's Gospel—surprisingly, when Jesus is talking about tensions *within* the church. In the more than 150 years of our St. Patrick's Parish, there have been episodes of conflict, hurt, and division. It's part of our story. In fact, it was part of the story of St. Matthew's church toward the end of the first century when this gospel was written.

In today's Gospel Jesus spells out a three-part process, in order to win back the sinful member, and truly put the union back into the communion. Let's focus on the first two steps.

Step one: **"If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone."**

Notice that the person wronged is to take the first step. And it's supposed to be "face to face," in order to heal the broken relationship.

St. Patrick's: This gives such insight into how *we* are to *be* "church!" Too often, at work, among family members or acquaintances--and yes, in the church--folks don't talk it out "face to face." They talk behind the back of the person apparently in the wrong. Folks turn to gossip. And it rips the unity of a church, tearing apart sacred relationships. Earlier this morning Pope Francis, in preaching on this Gospel, taught that gossiping is a worse plague than Covid-19.

There's a clear test to determine if one is gossiping: Would I say what I tell about someone if that person were also listening—on the telephone or in person? St. John of the Cross was the great 16<sup>th</sup> century saint who was put in prison by his own religious congregation. Indeed, he *knew* conflict. He said it like this: **"Never listen to accounts of the frailties of others; and if anyone should complain to you of another, humbly ask him not to speak of the other at all."**

Then Jesus sets out the second step, if this first step fails. **“If the person (who has done wrong) does not listen, take one or two others along with you...”**

Father John Behnke is a Paulist priest who served at St. Patrick’s for sixteen years, beginning exactly 40 years ago in 1980. He’s loved by many. During his time here, Father John and I were good friends and even took a two-week vacation together.

In 1991, a handful of persons--from the parish staff and parish leaders--met with him after much preparation. They talked to Father John about his unmanageable drinking, and how it affected them and was hurting the parish. (So hidden was this, that I as a friend didn’t even know of Father John’s drinking...nor did I hear it leak out from the staff or parish leaders!) Immediately he took the step and went voluntarily into a treatment center in Minnesota. Father John has given me permission to tell this story, and now he has been continuously sober, through AA, for almost 30 years.

Friends: See how that concern of St. Patrick members reclaimed a beloved member. They didn’t talk behind his back. They took the risk, face to face.

There are tensions, conflicts and divisions galore within our world and church today. We hear two of the three times Jesus uses the word “church” in the four gospels. He teaches us how to work toward healing. And he ends with this promise, **“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”** Jesus assures us that *he* is present when two or three of us risk at reconciliation. **“I am there among you.”**

*General Intercessions*

*September 6, 2020*

*23 Sunday A*

**Open our hearts to live as instruments of peace and reconciliation within our church and our nation; we pray to you, O Lord—**

**Open our ears to hear your voice in the silence of solitude as well as in the sounds of our daily life; we pray to you, O Lord—**

**Open our hands in support of all who have lost their jobs in the midst of the pandemic, and those who also yearn for just wages and safe working conditions this Labor Day weekend; we pray to you, O Lord—**

**Open our eyes to see the beauty within our diversity of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. End racism and bigotry in all its forms; we pray to you, O Lord—**

**Open the minds of all researching a vaccine for Covid-19; bring your healing to all suffering from the coronavirus; give strength to all who serve those ill from Covid-19; open up hearts of hope within us all; we pray to you, O Lord—**