

**Matt. 5:21** “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ **22** But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. **23** So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, **24** leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

It is normally my habit to use only one piece of Scripture in a sermon. But today we will go back for seconds. Since tomorrow in particular is a big day of new Bible Study adventures, I would like to talk about the Gospel of Matthew for a moment. One key thing that I have been hearing for 40 years now is that Matthew, while not the earliest Gospel written, was probably carefully put together *to call the Church to order*. To call the Church to order. By the time Matthew is being written, the Church has been going for probably 50 years, maybe more. Jerusalem has been destroyed by the Romans, lots of things have been happening. But one thing is for sure, and that is that the Church is planted, and it is growing.

Now we might look at that and smile, and ask “*Well, what could possibly go wrong? After all, this is the Church of Jesus Christ?*” We might think that it could just go on auto-pilot and cruise into the future. But what problem does the Church have? It is filled with people. Do people just automatically get along wonderfully, do they always give each other the benefit of the doubt, do they always operate so that there are never ever, **ever** any disagreements? Is that how we humans do? I am still waiting for that to kick in, if that is something that is coming. I have been watching this program on TV called “1971” which is all about the year 1971, and how the music changed and the culture changed. I think it is a great program. But the end of kind of disappointing: it

became clear to me that the problems of 1971 have not gone away. 50 years later, the same things are still wrong. It seems pretty clear that for the human race as we call ourselves, we cannot just put things on cruise control and think that they all lived happily ever after.

The Gospel of Matthew knows that the world cannot just go on to cruise control and be fine. The Church has been born to try to help SAVE the world, from itself. The Church must be taken seriously, and it really cannot slide down the list of things that matter to us. The Church must live, and it must grow, and it must be healthy, and it must become the living Body of Christ for this world. So Matthew is going to play a key roll, by *calling the Church to order*. It is going to lay out its stories and teachings in such a way that the Church will live, it will grow, and it will be healthy. And so, there will be much in Matthew that will be an instruction book for us, so that we can live, and grow, and be healthy. And for today, this is going to lead us to two places that have the same concern.

Our first part today from Matthew 5 was something we actually heard last August when we went all the way through the Sermon on the Mount. We went over this for 2 months. I think there was great stuff in there for us! In this part Jesus is talking about what to do with anger. People get angry all the time. My big concern here is not about the anger so much, as it is what we are to do when we realize that we have a problem with someone. I believe that certain passages resonate with people, and for whatever it is worth, these words have ALWAYS resonated within me: "... *So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be*

*reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*” Making our offering to God is very important. We need to remember how to do that after these Covid shutdown months. But according to Jesus, there is something here that is more important than the offering. And that is being estranged from your brothers and sisters in the Church. As important as the offering is to the work of the Church, as important as it is for us spiritually to give back to God in order to say thanks, there is something even more important: we cannot be fighting and separated from each other. Now, some people might say “Actually we can be separated from each other.” Jesus will have something to say about this. Wait for it.

As important as our offering is, it is even more important for us, for the sake of the Body of Christ, that we are reconciled, one to another. We cannot be divided and estranged. This will come back later in Matthew in chapter 18, which we will hear now:

Matt: 18 . 15 - 20

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. <sup>16</sup> But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup> If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup> Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup> Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

This passage is the heart of what people are now calling “**The Rule of Christ.**” In fact all clergy are required to go through this, along with Staff Parish people in a church. Why do they want us to do this? Because, people have disagreements and even conflicts. Things happen. But, ultimately what is Job One? We are to be the Church, and we are to live, and grow, and be healthy. I have to say

that I am a little uncomfortable with this. There are churches that literally will force this on people if there is a disagreement. People will go to your house with others, and make you talk about your disagreement. I would never insist on forcing anything. I am much more in tune with the earlier words from Matthew 5 about going to reconcile before dealing with your offering.

I have been listening to my wife the Counselor for many years. And I have learned lots of good things from her. She knows her stuff. And a big thing I have always heard about is what is called **TRIANGULATION**. In fact we have a helpful picture here. There is always a picture of a Triangle. Now, how many corners are in one of these? Three. Now let's check: how many people does it take to have a disagreement? You must have at least Two. Now, should the disagreement of two people get imported into a thing that has Three sides and three corners? Two is not the same as three. But three is what often happens. Thus, the Triangle.

Two people will disagree about something. Instead of the Two talking it over and trying to come to some understanding, one person takes the issue to others. In our days of advanced communication, we can spread a lot of news to others in a hurry. So what should have stayed in place between the original Two ends up multiplying. It tends to get much bigger, and it tends to get distorted, so that by the time the 20th person has heard about it, it might not even be accurate at all to what the original disagreement was. Triangulation hurts relationships between people. When this takes place within a Church, it does damage to the Body. But that is a bad thing. Because we need to live, and grow, and be healthy.

As hard as this seems, whenever someone in a Church has a disagreement with another person in the Church, the best possible thing is to have the two original people talk to each other and keep it between themselves. It is not good to have one person take things out to others who are not a part of the original situation. I mentioned before why this matters so much to Jesus. I mentioned earlier that we needed to “wait for it.” Well. This is what we were waiting for. At the end of this passage from Matthew 18, Jesus makes the greatest promise: *<sup>19</sup> Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”*

I wonder if we take this promise seriously enough: If we are gathered in the name of Jesus, and we deal with things so that we can live, and grow, and be healthy, then Jesus himself will be present with us. I can guarantee you this: when people in churches are fighting with each other, and not trying to reconcile, and being fine with whisperings and gossip and estrangement, Jesus will not be present there. So, the choice is ours. As a Church, do we want Jesus to be present? Do we want to be alive, and grow, and be healthy? If these things are happening, we will be attracting other people. They will want to be where the life and health are present. People want that in our broken world. People fight against each other all the time out in the world. They desperately hope that the Church will be a place where that will not be the way of things. This is the Rule of Christ. We thank Matthew for helping call the Church to order. May we use this wisdom to be Christ’s Body. AMEN.