

“The Discipline of Community”

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

I have appreciated the importance of church building for the mission and ministry of the Christian community of faith ever since I served a congregation that did not have its own building. It was my second call in New Jersey, a new mission congregation in Ocean County along the Jersey Shore that rented a local school gymnasium for its Sunday worship services and was always searching for meeting space for its weekday activities. While there were many exciting aspects of this new ministry, having to set up and tear down the Sunday worship space every week was quite challenging, and always looking for places to hold meetings and classes became a constant challenge. But this challenge also led me to meet one of my most supportive colleagues who was the pastor of the local United Methodist church, a congregation that was very welcoming for us and even gave me a key to the building for our weekday gatherings. Pastor Marvin Wells and I developed a very close friendship and would often get together for coffee or lunch and talk about the challenges we were facing in our respective congregations. Among the many colleagues with whom I have shared ministry over the years, Marvin is one person who I remember and for whom I give thanks after all these years.

One day, I was in waiting in Marvin’s office as he was meeting with his church secretary and looking over the books on his shelves – an occupational hazard for pastors. As I was looking at his books, one caught my eye: a volume entitled *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*. The title struck me as being quite harsh: why did my Methodist friends need an entire book to outline discipline in their church? No sooner had I thought this than Marvin appeared in the office and saw me looking at the book; after I asked him what was the purpose of this book, his answer was surprising: “It is not a book about how to discipline people who are misbehaving; it is about how we live together as a community of Christians.” He then took the book off the shelf and opened it to the opening page, which explained the purpose of this important document in the life and mission of his church:

- “This book of covenant sets forth the theological grounding of The United Methodist Church in biblical faith and claims that we move forward as ‘loyal heirs of the authentic Christian tradition.’ It affirms that The United Methodist

Church is an inclusive society without regard to ethnic origin, economic status, gender, age, or abilities of its constituents. It affirms that all baptized and confirmed persons are ministers of Jesus Christ ... We pray that it will enable all persons to celebrate the gift of God's grace, exalt the calling to faithful discipleship, support and engage the mission, and inspire a deeper and more effective witness for the head of the Church, Jesus Christ our Lord."

Even though we Lutherans do not have a similar document, discipline is very important in the life and mission of our Church and any church that seeks to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. The call to discipleship is a call to discipline, to live together not according to one's own wants and desires but to live as a community that commits itself to live and serve in obedience to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ. When we affirm our baptismal promises at Confirmation or in other significant moments, we commit ourselves to "*serve all people, follow the command of our Lord Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.*" (ELW Affirmation of Baptism). When persons are set apart for leadership roles in the church, they are charged with being obedient to the teachings of the Church and to discipline their lives so that God's Will might be accomplished through them. We are all called through baptism to live together in a community of faith in which discipline is important for the fulfillment of Christ's purpose for the church and so that we might live together in the manner in which our Lord intends for the Church which is the Body of Christ:

- "Wherever true community presents itself, discipline is crucial. It is crucial not only in the many old and new forms of the common life, but also in the sustaining relationships of friendship, marriage, and family. To create space for God among us requires the constant recognition of the Spirit of God in each other." – Henri Nouwen.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus sets forth rules for how his followers are to live together as a community of disciples and how they are to discipline those members of the community who are in danger of stumbling in their Christian life, are guilty of serious sin, and are behaving as unrepentant and disruptive participants in the congregational life of Christ's Church. Here Jesus sets up a three-stage process for dealing with those in the community who are in serious sin so as to prevent them from persisting with unrepentant hearts. The implication that a brother or sister might not return without intervention and the extent of community involvement in these stages indicates that these principles concern not small matters but grave sins. It is a reminder that while the Church is the community of the baptized who have been born anew to a living hope through their baptism into the death and resurrection

of Jesus Christ, they are at the same time also sinful human beings in need of repentance and the assurance of forgiveness, for *“if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us”* (1 John 1:8)

- The community of saints is not an ‘ideal’ community consisting of perfect and sinless men and women, where there is no need of further repentance. No, it is a community which proves that it is worthy of the gospel of forgiveness by constantly and sincerely proclaiming God’s forgiveness. It is a community of men and women who have genuinely encountered the precious grace of God, and who walk worthily of the gospel by not casting that grace recklessly away.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Jesus’ teaching recognizes the reality of sin within the community of faith and how unrepentant sin and destructive behaviour can threaten the health and mission of the Church that bears his name; the purpose is to call the person to repentance so that the blessings of forgiveness and reconciliation might be bestowed upon that person for their own sake and for the sake of the body. The first step involves disputes between two individuals in the church: *“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.”* (Matthew 18:15). A “member of the church” (*adelphos*) is one who is a sister or brother through their baptism into Christ. Our Lord gives no list of specific sins that might qualify for such a response, but the seriousness of the sin is implied by the means in which it is to be addressed. Although the sin is a matter of community concern, the private conversation between the offended and offender is to avoid embarrassment; it is not meant to be a harsh rebuke but an act of love to help the other see their wrongdoing and how it has affected the one addressing them. Commitment to the priority of life together in community does not mean lack of sensitivity to the feelings of other persons, but precisely the opposite: *“Only by such sensitivity and care can people live together in the new family of God gathered by Jesus.”* (M. Eugene Boring). The purpose of this one-on-one encounter is reconciliation: *“If the member listens to you, you have regained that one”* reflects the picture of the shepherd rejoicing in the recovery of the lost sheep (*“And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray”* – 18:13). Even a fellow Christian who sins is not an enemy but a brother or sister in Christ and a member of his family of disciples (*“For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”* – 12:50).

If the first encounter does not lead to the desired result of repentance and reconciliation, the next step is to *“take one or two others along with you, so that*

every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses” (18:16). This teaching reflects the principle of multiple witnesses as prescribed in the Torah:

- “A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offence that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained.” – Deuteronomy 19:15.

The inclusion of witnesses in this process is meant to heighten the sinner’s awareness of the seriousness of his or her situation and hopefully bring them to repent; in some cases, the offender may be unaware of their offense. The presence of witnesses from the community is meant to protect from misrepresentation both the alleged offender and the one who claims to be offended. Here our Lord adapts a longtime Jewish tradition of reconciliation on behalf of the community of disciples who are gathered in his name:

- “You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.” – Leviticus 19:17-18.

If neither the first nor the second step leads to repentance, the third step is to take it to the community: *“tell it to the church.”* (18:17). “Church” (*ekklesia*) here refers to the local congregation rather than the Church of Jesus Christ as a whole (16:16). Cases of recalcitrant members who resist all private efforts to bring them to repentance are to be brought before the congregation, whose involvement is to serve a pastoral purpose, to help the disciple in their effort to reconcile the sinner. If the sinner refuses to listen to the church, they are to be excluded from the community so that *“such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector,”* persons who were considered outside of the community of faith:

- “Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. Do not regard them as enemies but warn them as believers.” – 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15.

But even this severe action (what some refer to as “excommunication”) has a pastoral goal: to awaken the sinner by sharing that their actions have put them outside the community of believers. The Christian community as a whole is concerned with the actions of its individual members, and it intervenes in the spirit of love and forgiveness to take pastoral action that is more than mere advice, in the hope that

they will be drawn to repentance and reconciliation; *“the goal is not only to maintain the holiness of the insiders, but to bring straying members to an awareness of their sins, to repentance, and eventually restoration.”* (Boring).

- “The Gospel implies excommunication in its reference to the unrepentant sinner be treated ‘as a gentile and a tax collector’ ... Yet the phrase also alludes to hope for sinners’ restoration, since tax collectors and sinners are the very groups that Matthew earmarks for evangelization. Ideally, then, any expulsions from the assembly would be temporary separations pending successful reintegration.” – Nicholas J. Schaser.

With a pair of solemn “truly I tell you” sayings, Jesus assures the church of the divine ratification of its decisions: *“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. 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.”* (18:18-19). In ancient Judaism, the terms “bind” and “loose” are associated with the authority to teach and grant or withhold forgiveness of sins (*“I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one can shut; he shall shut, and no one can open.”* – Isaiah 22:22). The terms also denoted judicial authority to include or exclude persons from the community of faith. The authority given to Peter to make legal decisions for the church as a whole (*“I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”* – 16:19) is here given to the congregation in matters of its own discipline. Decisions made by Christ’s leaders on earth have the authority of heaven behind them. The united prayer of two disciples here refers to the Lord’s attentiveness to prayers for erring brothers and sisters in Jesus’ name and for guidance regarding how to care for them. With the authority bestowed on these church leaders come tremendous responsibility, especially when the community represents God’s presence and power in the world. It is the authority entrusted to the faith community by our Lord who came *“not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45), our Saviour whose commandment to his disciples is that they *“love one another as I have loved you”* (John 13:34), and who instructs his followers that *“just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”* (Matthew 25:40).

- “The point of Matthew 18 is not that the church or its leaders possess special authority or insight when dealing with disputes, but that whenever it does exercise authority, it must pay ceaseless attention to the least powerful members of the community. Whenever and whatever we bind or loose, the

Christian community is called to defend the interests of the least ones in our midst, as well as to create the space and conditions for forgiveness and restoration to flourish.” _Stanley Saunders.

Jesus’ teaching ends with one of his best-known yet least-understood sayings about his presence among his followers: “*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*” (18:20). This was an originally independent saying assuring the church of the continuing presence of Christ during the time of its mission, based on sayings at the beginning and the end of Matthew’s Gospel:

- ““Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’” – 1:23.
- “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” – 28:20.

The disciples gather in Jesus’ name, and Jesus becomes the divine presence abiding with them. While this certainly can refer to worship, in which Christ is present with those who worship in his name be they two or three followers or a gathering of thousands of the faithful, in this context it refers to the presence of our Lord in the community’s making its disciplinary decisions. Matthew’s church proclaims that when it gathers in Jesus’ name, Christ himself is present in their midst; “*the church is Christocentric rather than Torah-centric.*” (Boring).

- “Oh, if we would only busy ourselves with this noble work, how easily we could atone for our sins, even in the absence of much else! Even if we sin again, God will say, ‘This one has covered up and forgiven his neighbour’s guilt. Gather around, all you creatures, and in turn cover up his sin. This one’s sin shall not be remembered again.’” – Martin Luther.

As I think back on the years I shared with my colleague and brother in Christ Marvin, I give thanks for his friendship and the hospitality of the people of Waretown United Methodist Church. I also remembered learning about the importance of discipline that has nothing to do with punishment or strictness, but with the way in which the church organizes itself for the sake of the mission entrusted to it by our Lord Jesus Christ. The church is a community of discipline in which each member commits themselves to serving others in the name of Jesus Christ, being concerned with the health and well-being of other members of the faith community, and making certain that others who have strayed are given opportunities for forgiveness and reconciliation so that the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love may remain strong for the sake of “*proclaiming the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” (1 Peter 2:9).

- “It may sound strange to speak of a community as discipline, but without discipline community becomes a ‘soft’ word, referring more to a safe, homey, and exclusive place than to the space where new life can be received and brought to its fullness. Wherever true community presents itself, discipline is crucial. It is crucial not only in the many old and new forms of the common life, but also in the sustaining relationships of friendship, marriage, and family. To create space for God among us requires the constant recognition of the Spirit of God in each other.” – Henri Nouwen.

We Lutherans may not have a Book of Discipline, but like all Christian communities we are called to be a community of discipline, endeavoring to be faithful to our Lord’s calling to *“let your light so shine before others so that they see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:16). May all of our words and deeds be focused on sharing the love of God with others, allowing forgiveness and reconciliation to exist in our midst, and being a community of faith that seeks to love and serve in the name of the one who calls us into a life of discipline and discipleship for the sake of the world that God so loves.

Amen.