

In today's gospel, Jesus provides advice to his disciples on how to move step-by-step toward reconciling grievances within the Christian community. This is not a recipe that can be applied to all situations, but it gives some specific advice on how to resolve differences or conflicts when one is hurt by another member of the community.

First of all, the initiative almost always comes from the one who has been aggrieved. Hardly ever do reconciliation processes begin with those who have done the harm coming to their senses and asking forgiveness. The first step, says Jesus, is for the one who has suffered the hurt to confront the person who has inflicted or caused it. This is not as easy as it may sound. It is not a piece of cake as we usually say! We often relish retelling the story to others, while being reluctant to speak directly to the one who has hurt us. But there will never be peace as long as the one harmed allows the hurt to grow by holding on to it and recounting it to others. If, however, the one hurt musters the courage to speak to the other, and if the other has the courage to listen honestly and openly, reconciliation becomes a possibility.

What Jesus does not outline here is that for true reconciliation to occur, the one who is hurt must be willing to offer forgiveness, and the perpetrator of the harm must be willing to acknowledge it truthfully, amend the behavior, and make restitution, if possible. Then there is the possibility of a new future of peaceable interrelation between the two.

What if one-on-one confrontation does not work? Then, Jesus says, take one or two others along with you. This is not so that you can gather together and come up (i.e. gang up) on the one who hurt you but rather for establishing the truth of what happened. In Jewish tradition, two witnesses are needed for verification. Or, to use today's language, an impartial mediator or two can help establish the truth and can help bring the parties to an agreement.

Jesus anticipates that the disciples will press him further: But what if that doesn't work either? Then, Jesus says, involve the whole community, since any rupture in relationships within the Christian community affects all the members. This is possible because the whole community has role in binding or loosing offenses. If this strategy fails as well, Jesus then says to treat the offender as a Gentile or a tax collector.

At first this may seem to mean that the offender should be excluded from the community. But when we look at the way Jesus befriended and ate with such people, it may be that Jesus is asking us to be willing to sit and break bread together, even when we have irreconcilable differences, when it is impossible to understand each other. It is important to note that the gospel text does not indicate the nature of the offense. The strategy outlined in today's gospel would not work for every kind of offense. There are some people who do not care about forgiveness; either to give it to others or to ask for it.

Finally, Jesus urges the community to pray together for reconciliation. Already the conflicts go away when parties to a grievance can agree to pray for resolution. When they can really pray for good for the other, their prayer is already granted. Jesus asks us today to get together in praying because the prayer is more powerful remedy when especially it is said in a community.