

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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May these words of my mouth and this meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Whenever any of reads and interprets a passage of the bible, we inevitably read our own knowledge, lives, and experiences into the story. See, we all have our own proverbial “backpack” of life experience, and it’s normal that when we read scripture, we are predisposed to interpret it through our own particular lens of life experiences, memories, knowledge assumptions, etc.

Today’s passage from Matthew’s gospel is a good example of a passage that makes this interpretive process a little tricky, because at first glance there’s a very specific modern phenomenon that we might be tempted to read into the text. It might seem that Jesus’ words and instructions for the disciples and the early church is more or less laying out the rules and methods for “cancellation” or instilling “cancel culture” into the church.

For those unfamiliar with the term, “cancel culture” refers to the somewhat common practice of “cancelling” a public figure for their wrongdoings (whether real or fabricated). Oftentimes the conversation to cancel a public figure begins on social media, and is essentially, an effort to remove that figure from public discourse and the public awareness because they acted or spoke in such a way that deemed them no longer worthy of having a platform. Cancelled actors or musicians often find it incredibly hard to get hired for new gigs or shows, some political commentators who have been

cancelled have stepped away from their careers entirely. For our purposes “cancellation” or “cancel culture” mostly means a widespread public movement to remove an individual from their place of status.

Perhaps you can see why my mind went to cancellation when focusing on Jesus’ words from today’s gospel. Ultimately, as Jesus describes how to address conflict within the community of the early church, the natural progression in how to go about doing things, seems to ultimately land upon complete ostracization. Jesus says to first address the wrongdoing alone with the one who wronged you, then if that doesn’t resolve things to bring 1 or 2 witnesses to try and help resolve the issue. And if that fails, to bring the matter before the whole church. And if the wrongdoer still refuses, Jesus instructs his followers to then “treat the offender as you would a Gentile and a tax collector.” In other words, to treat them as an abject outsider to the insular circle of the community of the faithful. One could certainly make the argument that here within Jesus’ words are instructions for how to “cancel” someone from the church community if they are too stubborn and stalwart in their actions and wrongdoing.

However, I think to read this modern experience so fully into the text is to miss the point of what is truly being taught and advocated for here. Jesus’ words are not so much a blueprint for how to remove someone from the church community, but rather an appeal to the strength, grace, and compassion found within the experience of living with a communal mindset. Not as individuals, but as a whole collective being made up of many unique members daily raised to new life together through baptism.

In today’s age, it is all too easy to live our lives in a sort of paralyzed fear, constantly second-guessing what we say or do, lest we do something wrong

and get cancelled by the masses, or called out in such a way that publicly showcases our lack of knowledge or imperfection. But what Jesus describes in this passage is not so much a process of calling others out in order to shame and ridicule them into obsolescence and exclusion, but calling others in to a process of reconciliation, forgiveness, and communal understanding.

I have actually lived through this process that Jesus describes a few times, but one experience stands out to me the most. While still a student in seminary, I was standing in the school's dining room, chatting with several of my close friends and classmates. One of my friends, Micah, had recently changed his name from the one I had originally known him by, and I accidentally referred to him as the name he longer used. He gently corrected me, and his correction mad me feel terrible. I thought I had committed an egregious sin and failed as a friend and an ally. Visibly upset, I walked away from the conversation to skulk in my shame and try to calm myself down. As I left the group I replayed what had gone wrong in my head so that I could avoid making the same mistake in the future.

Later that night, that same group of friends and many others had gathered at a friend's house for a get-together, and at some point during the night, Micah approached me with a few other friends as witnesses and told me that when I had reacted the way I did earlier in the day, I ended up causing more harm. My over-the-top reaction had actually taken a moment where he was trying to center his identity, and I made it about my own perceived failure. When he corrected me, he was lovingly inviting me to do better, but I had received it as an indictment on what I perceived as a transgression. That night, he made sure to tell me "Tom, I wasn't calling you out, I was calling

you *in*.” I thanked him for sharing that with me, and we were able to enjoy the rest of the night and remain remarkably close friends to this day.

Micah’s actions, I believe exemplify what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples. This passage is by no means a road map or blueprint for how to bash members of the church community when they misstep or miss the mark with their words or actions. It is not a playbook of how to call people out in order to shame, but it is an invitation, an example of how to call our siblings *in* to the work of reconciling with each other and restoring a sense of harmony within the community. It is a guide to living from a point of compassion and grace first and foremost so that the whole community, especially those most vulnerable to harm, might flourish together.

It’s no surprise that Jesus thought this a necessary lesson to teach the disciples. It seems that a sense of individualism had taken root among the people and this lesson is aimed at returning the people to a communal identity. It does not take long to find examples of how people seeking their individual gain. Some that immediately came to mind for me were the merchants and money changers who had turned the temple into a place of commerce. It’s not that being a merchant was bad on it’s own, but to seek out personal material gain in such a sacred temple was definitely sinful. There’s also the story of the rich young man who asked what he needed to do to enter the kingdom of God, and Jesus responded “go, sell all you have.” And there are multiple stories of Jesus’ disciples arguing amongst themselves trying to discern which of them is the highest rank or Jesus’ second in command.

Jesus recognizes this desire for personal gain, and seeks to correct it by turning the disciple’s focus to community and reconciliation. The lesson is

that there is strength, there is goodness to be found when we care for one another, far more than anything we might earn and raise for purely personal purposes. Obviously, every community will have its problems and its issues. Conflict will always arise when humans are involved with one another. But conflict does not have to be a bad thing, it can actually be an opportunity to let the community call you in to a renewed and reconciled way of being.

Even Jesus' teachings for how to treat those who adamantly refuse to repent of wrongdoing in front of the whole church do not land in a place of complete cancellation or expulsion from the community. Jesus' tells his followers to treat such individuals as gentile or tax collectors, and yet, how did Jesus himself treat such individuals? He spoke with them, met with them, sat down and shared meals with them. Even those his disciples might consider completely outside their community, Jesus finds a way to call them in to his way of love and reconciliation.

I cannot help but think about how much this story speaks to us today. We live in a society where hyper individualism runs rampant, and inequality among social groups has never been more stark. The hyper wealthy continue to amass riches at the expense of those living paycheck to paycheck. Decades of extractive practices have left underdeveloped and developing countries ravaged and impoverished, while the elite in foreign lands capitalized and profited off of the exploitation of workers. Jesus reminds us today through his lesson to the disciples that it does not need to be this way, there is strength and goodness to be found in listening to and caring for each other in community.

And so it is my prayer that the Spirit always lead us back to one another. May we find Christ in community, may we listen to one another when we have

wronged our neighbors and are called in to reconcile. May we meet each other's needs and act first and foremost out of the love and compassion we have first been shown in Christ. And may we always be assured that when we do these things, Christ and the Holy Spirit is there with us, guiding us and leading us. In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.