



**His Excellency,
The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph.D., S.T.D.
Diocese of Belleville**

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Saturday, September 9, 4:30 Mass
Blessed Sacrament

Sermon:

“I Am in Your Midst”

(This is the text as originally written. During the actual delivery, some passages were omitted and other comments were added spontaneously. *Nota bene*: This text has not been thoroughly proofread. Therefore, there may be errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

“I’m sorry! It was my fault. I apologize. Please forgive me.” These are some of the most difficult words for most of us to speak. However, it can be even more difficult for us to tell other people that what they did or said is wrong; that they were at fault. That what they did or said hurt you and others. That they are the ones who should apologize. Often, we tend to look for ways to avoid apologizing and avoid confronting others with their wrong doings.

It seems easier for parents to tell their children that their behavior is unacceptable and that they should apologize than it is for adults to say the same thing to another adult. We may feel it is presumptuous for us to challenge or be critical of another adult. We may be concerned about their possible negative reaction. And, while children may be willing to begrudgingly apologize to their parents for their wrongdoing, adults are often hesitant or embarrassed about apologizing to other adults.

This can be true in almost all relationships: husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, neighbors, coworkers, and, yes, members of a parish like Blessed Sacrament or Queen of Peace. While parishioners, as members of Christian communities, usually make a special effort to get along with one another, we all know that there are conflicts and disagreements in every parish. Pastors and parishioners. Parishioners and other parishioners, staff members and parishioners, school faculty members and school parents. Bishops, priests, and deacons. In all of these relationships, Christians strive to work in harmony. And most of the time we succeed. But since we are flawed human beings and redeemed sinners, there are times when differences lead to conflicts, when conflicts lead to anger, when anger boils over to open hostility and the bonds of Christian fellowship are strained almost to the breaking point.

Such strife can cause some members of the parish family to stop speaking to one another, some parishioners to avoid others, and still others to stop coming to Church altogether because of unresolvable differences.

In my own life, I have experienced a situation in which I believe that I truly hurt or offended someone whom I cared for deeply, and it took me several months to realize the pain I had caused. So, I set out to make amends. I called the person repeatedly and left numerous voicemail messages, but I never received a call back. I sent texts, emails, and personal, handwritten letters of apology, with all sincerity, yet the person never responded in any way. Now, more than a year has passed and still I have not succeeded in bringing about reconciliation, or forgiveness.

I have prayed about this situation often, discussed it with my spiritual director, and acknowledged my fault in the matter in Confession. I simply do not know what else to do. Perhaps some of you have had a similar experience of the collapse of a treasured Christian friendship. What are we to do?

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Maybe the first thing we should do is remind ourselves that relationships are at the heart of our Christian faith. The heart of our faith is not primarily a set of teachings and beliefs about God. It is not primarily a set

of rules to follow to please God. The heart of our Catholic faith is our *relationship* with God, through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our relationship with one another flows from our relationship with God, who is Love. It is God's love that gives us Jesus of Nazareth, who, in this evening's reading from the gospel of Matthew, 18:15-20, talks about the difficulties that can undo the bonds of love and fellowship among Christians.

Jesus' teaching is clear, but it is not simple or easy. First, Jesus says, "If your brother or sister sins against you, go and tell the person his or her fault between the two of you, all alone. If the person listens to you, you have won over your brother or sister."

Jesus is saying that when someone in your family or in the parish family hurts you deeply, talk to them about it personally, one on one, when the two of you are by yourselves. This first step is as simple and as complicated as it sounds. When someone sins against you, go and talk to him or to her. Don't ignore the disagreement. Don't hope that it will just go away. Don't broadcast it on Facebook. Deal with the disagreement head on. Tell the person of your hurt. Be honest about what you are feeling. Hopefully, the person will listen humbly, and the friendship will be restored. Imagine if we all did this faithfully. What a difference this approach would make in our relationships!

But, Jesus wasn't born yesterday. He knows that this does not always happen. So, second, He says, "If someone does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that all the facts may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses."

If a heart-to-heart talk does not work, keep looking for ways to bring about reconciliation and healing. Ask trusted friends to help you, ideally friends who the person respects. This second step is certainly not easy. The people you ask may prove untrustworthy. They may gossip about the conflict. Or they may listen to you carefully and conclude that you are really the one at fault! But, if all goes well, this may lead to the end of the quarrel. But not always.

Third, Jesus says, if the person who has done wrong in the Christian community refuses to listen even to two wise and respected members of the parish, then share the matter with a larger group, "the Church," but not necessarily the whole parish! Ideally, in a prayerful conversation with more parishioners, the problem can be resolved.

Fourth, Jesus says, “If someone refuses to listen even to the Church, then treat that person as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.” What does this mean? The Jewish people despised the tax collectors who demanded money for the Roman emperor, and they did not associate with gentiles who were unbelievers. Some think that Jesus means to exclude unrepentant people from the faith community, in other words excommunicate them. But remember, Matthew, the gospel writer, was himself a reformed tax collector, and Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners.

Could Jesus be saying that the person who does not repent of sinful activity, even after numerous loving, nonjudgmental attempts at correction, should still remain as an accepted part of the community? Show the person unconditional love and forgiveness, while continuing to challenge the person to become a more faithful disciple of Jesus! Obviously, we need a heart full of grace to take such a loving, accepting approach to someone who has hurt us or the parish deeply.

Some of you may be thinking that this approach of Jesus is unrealistic; it would never work with some of the people you know and in some of the situations in your parish. How do you know? Have you tried it? The key to binding the wounds of conflict is to remain confident in the “Real Presence” of Christ, not only in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, but also in the midst of Christians quarreling.

As He tells us: “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.”

Praise be Jesus Christ. Both now and forever! AMEN!