



Beatitudes and moral Teachings

1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Psalm 119:1-8; Matthew 5:21-27 **Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (February 12, 2023)**

Who likes conflict? And yet, it's all around us. It's part of life. But this does not mean we need to passively accept it with a victim's attitude asking ourselves, "What can *I* do? I am so insignificantly small that I cannot do anything about the Russian war in Ukraine, or women's rights in Afghanistan, or anti-Semitism and anti-Asian prejudices, or..." We regretfully accept it as part of being human and living together.

I don't like conflict but I can't avoid it. Nobody likes it. Yet, we each are encouraged not to play the victim but to work with conflict, learn from it, and respond to it creatively.

The apostle Paul encountered conflict. The Church in Corinth is a prime example of that. It is evident the Church is split into small groups all expressing support for one Church leader or another. And they are pretty vocal about it (1 Cor 1:11). Paul tries to explain that Christians are made so by the power and presence of Jesus who gathers us all into one fellowship. No way the Body of Christ can be divided. The different leadership styles are meant to build and nurture the body just as a farmer would care for a field or builder would a building. Christ is at the foundation of who we are. Subsequent leaders work the field prepared by God or build on the foundation laid by Christ.

And all this needs to be approached from a spiritual point of view (1 Cor 2). Human wisdom with all its schemes and fears is not enough. In fact, human wisdom may cause irreparable damage. In God's eyes, that is foolishness. The only thing that may bring people together is the acknowledgment of the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross. By itself, it only exposes the hatred and jealousy reversed on a powerless victim. The cross is instrument of rational law: human wisdom and power abused by the strong to impose and maintain order and the status quo. In God's hands, the cross becomes an instrument of faithful love, compassion at any cost.

Paul sounds exasperated with the Church in Corinth (1 Cor 3). He is not afraid of calling them names: they are clearly infantile and acting like fools. They are certainly not ready to receive substantial spiritual food. They can only handle the equivalent of milk. That is pretty embarrassing to hear.

By pointing out the specific issues preventing growth within the Corinthian community, Paul is effectively holding up a mirror to get the body of believers to see itself honestly. In doing so the apostle connects the congregation's health to its ability to reckon with its own identity.

Reckoning with identity is rarely a straightforward process, and often involves listening and struggle. Even now, congregations and church bodies are presented with opportunities to look into the mirror.

The ELCA's 2021 "Declaration to American Indian and Alaska Native People"¹ is shaped as a confession that calls us to recognize the church's complicity in the doctrine of discovery and how that has harmed relationships with Native people. The same may be said for an earlier document, the ELCA's 2019 "Declaration of the ELCA To People Of African Descent". The last paragraph of this declaration prepares the ground for further development: "An apology is only empty words and promises unless it is accompanied by action, which is grounded in prayer, education, and soul-searching repentance. We trust that God can make all things new."²

How might Paul's words in 1 Corinthians urge us to engage in difficult conversations and work toward healing and growth for the sake of being God's people?

Today's Gospel lesson is part of a long sermon that came to be known as the Sermon on the Mount. That sermon spans over three chapters of the gospel of Matthew (chapters 5, 6, and 7). It couldn't possibly be given in ten or even fifteen minutes. Where did Jesus find the stamina to talk that long or the people the concentration to listen without falling asleep or becoming impatient? Had anyone come back to Jesus with complaints? It gets even worse. The Sermon on the Mount moves from the hopeful-sounding Beatitudes into a more difficult portion of teaching. The Ten Commandments are hard enough to keep, does Jesus really have to make them harder?

Jesus seems to level the ground for honest conversation. Yes, undoubtedly, the Law says...but if you are even simply thinking about harming your neighbor, you are convicted of the same sin. In other words, don't go around condemning others without considering that you aren't any better. If you feel malice (anger, bitterness, jealousy, or any negative emotion) toward someone but you don't act on it, what does that say about you? does it mean that you're better than others? Even if we try not to act on our thoughts, the very fact that we have evil thoughts tells us that we have work to do. Our negative thoughts and malicious feelings can alert us that we have more work to do before the love in our hearts can be the dominant force in the way we act toward others.

Everyone needs God's grace and forgiveness, because no one can keep God's laws perfectly. We all feel internally and externally conflicted and try our best at following God's Law. Compassion for ourselves precedes the realization that we need to be compassionate to others. Jesus is not just imposing an impossibly high standard here; he's exposing the truth about why God gave laws to the Israelites in the first place.

He wants us to know that we can never please God by merely keeping the letter of the law, because "The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

As in so many of Jesus' teachings, he is showing people that God doesn't just desire obedience, God desires to be known by us, and for us to know God at a heart level. Remember: Jesus' sermon started with the Beatitudes. Refer back to them. Go back to who you are.

We follow God's laws imperfectly like all who have come before us, all the way back to Adam and Eve. God knew this would happen. In Jesus, God makes a way for us to be reconciled and transformed by focusing on what's happening in our hearts and how that impacts what we say and do. May we come to God with repentant hearts. May we turn to others with humility and compassion. Amen.

¹ [Declaration to American Indian Alaska Native.pdf \(elca.org\)](#)

² [Slavery Apology Explanation.pdf \(elca.org\)](#)