

If Matthew's Jesus is setting up a club, then these rules are pretty straightforward: If another club-member offends you, confront them. If they don't listen to you, gather an intervention team to meet with them again. If they still don't listen, tell everyone in the club what they did. In the end, you may just have to kick them out.

And there are churches who interpret this passage that way. It *is* simpler.

But in this story, that appears only in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is up to something much more complicated than establishing rules for club-members. Jesus is offering a pattern to his followers for building Christian community. Settling disputes is secondary. The *primary* purpose is to create an environment where Christ's presence in our practices of forgiveness and repentance lead to reconciliation.

Life is unpredictable for Matthew's community. First century Jewish and Gentile Christians are working to create the loving, harmonious community that Paul had hoped for in writing to the Romans. Some 30 to 40 years after Paul, they face significant obstacles.

The religious institutional structures and functional lines of authority that Paul relied on have broken down. The failed Jewish rebellion against the Roman Empire and the destruction of the Second Temple have torn at the roots of Judaism. Jews across the ancient world were considering what it meant to be faithful.

In largely pagan Syria, where Matthew's community was, the boundaries between Jewish communities and emerging Christian communities were permeable and indistinct. For Paul and Matthew, Jesus was not a replacement of Jewish teachings, but the embodiment and fulfillment of Torah.

Paul was not at all unclear about who he was. He identified himself as a loyal Jew; a circumcised Israelite from the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, a Roman citizen and a Pharisee, and the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul abandoned his social privileges and identified himself with others so that he could save them.

Identity, the sense of who we are, is an intricate notion.

Eventually, the early "not-quite-Jews" and "not-quite-Gentiles" will come to define themselves as followers of Jesus; as Christians. But in Mathew's

day, they are defined as much by what they are *not* as by what they are. Matthew's people are no longer welcome in synagogues. The fledging church is discovering the need to redefine themselves and establish a new identity.

Back then, as it is now, identity consisted of many elements: tribal affiliation, ethnicity, gender, native language. All these and others still make up who it is that we say we are. Our individual identity develops and changes over time through our relationships and interactions with other people.

Amin Maalouf is a Lebanese-born, Arab Christian, a French citizen and an author. In his books on identity, Maalouf points out that who we claim to be is greatly influenced by other people. As we mature, we become connected to a wider assortment of different people. As a result, every person, without exception, has an identity that is complex, unique and irreplaceable.

In addition to the people who want to include us, Maalouf warns that we are also shaped by those who want to separate us out. When people want to exclude us, they will frequently reduce our unique constellation of loyalties down to one simplistic label.

Ironically, we can react by defining ourselves more and more in terms whichever of our allegiances is most under attack. We can start reducing *our own* sense of self to an over-simplified label that has been chosen for us by those who dislike us.

The more we feel disrespected simply for being a Jew or a Gentile, the more we risk dropping ourselves deeper into a reduced identity as victims until our angry resentment separates us from other people. The more we feel disregarded simply for being a black woman or a white man, the more we risk allowing victimizing experiences to define smaller and smaller lives for us. The more we feel dismissed simply for being a conservative or a liberal, the more we isolate and insulate ourselves in groups defined by what they can't stand and less by groups defined by what they stand for.

We start hardening the "rules for membership" into simplistic formulas for maintaining order. And do you know what happens in truly isolated systems? Entropy, the gradual decline of energy and the complete breakdown of relationships. In physics, the second law of thermodynamics calls this decay "heat death."

We don't have to accept that option as inevitable.

What Matthew's Jesus offers is vastly different. And it does require more work. But remember, Jesus is speaking to Christ-followers. He isn't

asking us to ignore injustice or to disregard hostility or hurtful words to maintain a false sense of peace. As Christ-followers, we promise to seek and serve Christ in all people; to strive for justice and peace among all people; and to respect the dignity of every human being.

The life-giving, relationship-focused alternative that Jesus describes to his followers looks something more like this: If another practitioner has damaged your relationship, go to them in private. There is no need to shame them and you may have simply misunderstood.

If the two of you can't mend fences, gather a few spiritually mature practitioners and try again. That way, there are more perspectives available and a stronger presence of Christ.

If there is still no harmony after a few observers have offered their perspectives, bring the matter to the community and, in hearing the grievance, let the entire community of practitioners seek resolution.

And if none of that results in reconciliation, treat the offending practitioner the same way that Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors.

That is to say, love them and stay open to the promise of forgiveness and repentance.

We are practitioners centered on the presence of God in Christ and our identity as children of God unites us. But we are also a collection of individual people who each have a complex, unique and irreplaceable identity. We may not agree with each other, but we practice both forgiveness and repentance in the pursuit of reconciliation.

The presence of God in Christ was and still is the reason for being church. The presence of God in Christ was and still is the inspiration for maintaining relationships in the church.

And so, when we are at odds with one of our brothers or sisters, we approach each other open to the possibility that we may need to change our behavior or our words. We may need to ask for forgiveness and to be forgiving ourselves.

With practice, we learn to appreciate our own complex sense of who we are, as well as the intricacies of our brothers and sisters. By expanding our sense of who we are and who others are, we counteract a widespread perspective that Maalouf finds dangerous: the notion that deep down, there is one fundamental truth about each human being, a never-changing "essence" determined once and for all at birth.

By practicing with our Christian sisters and brothers, instead of assuming that people are one identity only – a surface that we can see or language that we can hear – we begin to see that we are *all* some unique and evolving combination that may be worth exploring.

Instead of seeking to get even, when people disrespect, disregard or dismiss us because of a one-dimensional identity that others assign to us, we learn to meet them with overwhelming love.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had ample opportunities to sink into the one-note identity that his detractors tried to impose on him. And yet, in a sermon on Matthew preached almost 60 years ago, here's what Dr. King said about loving one's enemies:

“...if you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption. You just keep loving people and keep loving them, even though they're mistreating you...Keep loving them. Don't do anything to embarrass them. Just keep loving them...And by the power of your love they will break down under the load.”

When we sing the Offertory hymn together in a few minutes, I invite you to look around and see the people God has gathered together here. Unique children of God, each with a lifetime of hurts and hopes, with individual preferences and tastes; people with histories and dreams, with talents and shortcomings, all gathered around the presence of the One God in Christ Jesus.

God has brought this marvelous mix of people together to practice holding each other in love. Here, God fills us with the reconciling presence of Christ, and sends us out to spread new life in the world God loves so dearly.

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