**Life Together** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church Matthew 18:15-20; Romans 13:8-14 Saint Paul, Minnesota
September 10, 2023

Any *Midsomer Murders* fans here this morning?

Midsomer Murders is a British [detective](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=c39cde785a6459ceJmltdHM9MTY5NDIxNzYwMCZpZ3VpZD0xMTY5NGZkZC05OWE5LTY0ZTQtMTkzNS01ZjkwOTgwMTY1N2YmaW5zaWQ9NTcxNQ&ptn=3&hsh=3&fclid=11694fdd-99a9-64e4-1935-5f909801657f&u=a1L3NlYXJjaD9xPURldGVjdGl2ZSUyMGZpY3Rpb24lMjB3aWtpcGVkaWEmZm9ybT1XSUtJUkU&ntb=1) drama set in modern-day England. The stories revolve around the efforts of [Detective Chief Inspector](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=bf546031f81d21afJmltdHM9MTY5NDIxNzYwMCZpZ3VpZD0xMTY5NGZkZC05OWE5LTY0ZTQtMTkzNS01ZjkwOTgwMTY1N2YmaW5zaWQ9NTcxNg&ptn=3&hsh=3&fclid=11694fdd-99a9-64e4-1935-5f909801657f&u=a1L3NlYXJjaD9xPUNoaWVmJTIwSW5zcGVjdG9yJTIzVW5pdGVkJTIwS2luZ2RvbSUyMHdpa2lwZWRpYSZmb3JtPVdJS0lSRQ&ntb=1) [*Tom Barnaby*](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=3e2fae607328131cJmltdHM9MTY5NDIxNzYwMCZpZ3VpZD0xMTY5NGZkZC05OWE5LTY0ZTQtMTkzNS01ZjkwOTgwMTY1N2YmaW5zaWQ9NTcxNw&ptn=3&hsh=3&fclid=11694fdd-99a9-64e4-1935-5f909801657f&u=a1L3NlYXJjaD9xPVRvbSUyMEJhcm5hYnklMjB3aWtpcGVkaWEmZm9ybT1XSUtJUkU&ntb=1)*,* and later his successor, cousin *John Barnaby,* to solve numerous murders that take place in the picturesque but deadly villages of the fictional county of Midsomer.

Much of the popularity of the series arises from the *incongruity* of sudden violence in a picturesque and peaceful rural setting. For example, each episode usually contains several murders, the high [body count](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Body_count) being a well-known feature of the show. *Humor* and *dark comedy* are also main features of the series, such as a woman being murdered with a giant *wheel of cheese.*

And, interestingly, (at least for me), *village churches and clergy* are often centrally featured in the show. For instance, in an episode titled *The Made-to-Measure Murders,* a tailor dies of a heart attack. Two years later his widow is murdered on her way to the vicarage. The vicar is also murdered after receiving a mysterious letter. In another episode, titled, *The Straw Woman,* the villagers of Midsomer Parva have all come out one evening to see the revival of an old Pagan festival, starring a huge straw effigy of a woman. When it is set alight the public’s wonder soon turns to horror when the presiding local curate [the assistant to the Priest] screams out in pain from within the effigy—burned alive.

In another episode, titled, *Death in Chorus,* Midsomer Worthy’s baritone, Connor Simpson, is killed just days before a competition and the rest of the *church choir* are in fear of their lives. Barnaby investigates and finds an atmosphere of bitter rivalry and tense marital relationships. And, finally, in an episode titled, *Ring Out Your Dead,* DCI Barnaby investigates the murders of *bell-ringers* from the village church, who are being mysteriously murdered one by one.

Fortunately for me, in more than 35 years of ordained ministry, I haven’t had anything this terrifying happen in any of the churches I have served!

Of course, all clergy have encountered parishioners behaving badly, but it’s usually of a much more mundane variety.

For example, EricaMacCreaigh*,* a Presbyterian minister in Iowa, said that the bitterest dispute she had ever witnessed began with a suggestion that the church begin buying *fair-trade coffee* for after-worship fellowship time. The pastor, unfortunately too distracted by preaching the gospel and visiting the sick, didn’t know about the *coffee mafia* (as they came to be known), nor the consequences of going against them. She gave the change her blessing.

Twelve bags of fair-trade coffee arrived soon thereafter and were set prominently next to the coffee mafia’s two *R2D2-sized coffee urns.* But to the great disappointment of some that Sunday, the coffee mafia refused to use the new brand.

Later that week in the pastor’s office, the coffee mafia bewailed (a) not having been consulted about the change and (b) the new coffee’s extravagant expense. The pastor assured them that no ill will was intended and suggested that they speak to the *carafe crashers* (as the offenders came to be known).

Rather than talk with the carafe crashers, the coffee mafia hid the 12 bags of new coffee in the church basement, in the same cupboard where old china went to die. The following week, the pastor entertained the complaints of the carafe crashers.

*“Didn’t anyone come talk to you?”* the pastor asked. The answer was no. So the pastor suggested that the carafe crashers enlist the *java jousters* (as they came to be known), two trusted members of the congregation who also happened to like good coffee, to join them in meeting with the coffee mafia.

Needless to say, the crashers and jousters did not talk with the coffee mafia, but two grueling days of detective work did unearth the hidden coffee cache. The crashers emptied the old coffee containers and filled them with the new coffee. The coffee mafia was not fooled. When Sunday came, the lamentable swill issuing from the coffee urns was almost as clear as water. Two days later, the disputants came before the church council.

In impressively *Solomonic fashion*, the council proposed a compromise: *blend the standard sturdy grind with the fair-trade grind.* The coffee mafia *wailed* that the expense of the new coffee remained unjustifiable, and the carafe crashers *moaned* that the piquant rainforest flavors of the new coffee would be irretrievably compromised.

Gnashing their teeth, the coffee mafia and carafe crashers submitted to the church council’s will. The great coffee massacre drew to a close.

However, a month later, an unidentified party swapped *soy-based coffee creamer* for half-and-half![[1]](#footnote-1)

So, let’s consider this story in light of what Jesus says in Matthew 18 this morning.

Jesus said little about the church—because the church did not yet exist during his lifetime. His interest was reform and revival of temple worship and the devotional life of the Jewish people. So, what we have here is a teaching on conflict resolution that originated with Jesus, but that Matthew is applying directly to his own church community*.*

Business gurus say the best problem-solving is quick, direct, and happens at the *lowest possible level.* In this week’s Gospel lesson, Jesus says essentially the same thing, *except* he would add discreetly. People who identify problems should address them *privately, humbly, and respectfully*. He’s not just giving us a command here. He’s giving us *permission,* empowering us to solve problems interpersonally, which is to say, *face-to-face.*

Alas, (as we have seen) the great *coffee massacre* (as it came to be known) did not play out that way.

It’s also important to note that the first-century church [for which Matthew’s Gospel was written] could not have fathomed a future *church so spectacularly self-entitled* that *beverages* would bring it to the brink of schism. Said MacCreaigh: *“Jesus is talking about real sin in our reading, not differences of opinion or style. Changing coffee, of course, is not a sin—it pains me to have to specify this—even factoring in the oversight of getting brand buy-in from all stakeholders. But self-assertion that sneaks around and undermines others flies in the face of a way of life that demands humility, forbearance, and forgiveness.*That*is the behavior Jesus wants his people to address quickly, directly, discreetly, and at the lowest possible level.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

She concluded: *“Jesus tells his followers to treat an unrepentant sinner in the church ‘as a gentile and a tax collector.’ Let’s not forget that most of Jesus’ followers over the centuries have been gentiles. As for tax collectors, Jesus called one to be his disciple. He ate with them, inviting himself into their homes and defending not only his right but his responsibility to be there when respectable members of society complained about the company he chose to keep.*

*Jesus didn’t advocate punishing or putting people out of the church. His stance was unerringly patient, interpersonal, and breathtakingly kind.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Where two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name, there he is among them.

You see, like it or not, our lives inevitably *intersect* with the lives of others. Sometimes these intersections are happy ones, with people who support and sustain us and whose full humanity and potential we likewise respect and encourage. But some are *full-on crashes* with all the hurt and destruction of a vehicular collision. So if we are to take *love of God and neighbor* seriously, we still have to work out the countless permutations of what such love means and how best to execute it in the very real, imperfect situations of our individual lives.

Jesus and Paul agree that it requires *careful consideration and judgment* on our parts. In other words, as people of God, we have great responsibility to determine, in the day to day of our lives, *how to love.* Simply being nice isn't going to cut it. Real love *in a down and dirty world* requires informed deliberation and sometimes tough choices. Jesus' remark about *"whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven"* brings to mind less *a geographical place* than *a state of being.* How we love or fail to love affects our relationships both to others and to God. Maybe, as Jesus suggests, in our dealings with others, we are not only learning to love, but we are also constantly shaping heaven.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Here's the point: “There is a *group aspect* to Christian faith,” as John Wurster reminds us. It’s not something we can really do by ourselves, no matter how vivid our imaginations. God calls us to faith but that call inevitably leads us into the company of other people. We learn to believe, and we grow in faith *together.*

The church, in this sense, is what we call a *“mediating institution,”* (like schools and libraries) where people of diverse backgrounds and differing viewpoints actually rub shoulders with one another--and this ongoing *“contact”* engenders more *trust,* more *solidarity,* and more *mutual kindness.* It helps you see the world through other people’s eyes. Moreover, it changes you as a person, because individuals with a diverse group of friends are more tolerant toward strangers. And contact is *contagious:* when you see a neighbor getting along with others, it makes you rethink your own biases.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Accordingly, a prevailing image in the New Testament for the church is a *body*, a body with *many parts.* The people in the body of Christ come with different gifts and abilities, backgrounds, and assumptions. *Yet* in all of our differences *we are made one in Christ.* God gathers us together as a community of faith. Left alone, we might come up with something kind of like Christianity that we could do on our own, even something fun and relatively safe; *yet* no matter how vividly we conceive them, our solitary religious games at best are partial expressions of faith the way the Bible speaks of it.

Our common life, our communal life, matters significantly in our efforts to follow Jesus. This week’s lesson from Matthew is one of many texts that give attention to the dynamics of community and how to keep a community strong and healthy. Jesus outlines here essentially a dispute resolution process, a process that seeks to be respectful and careful and fair.

Behind the process is the clear recognition that disputes will come along in the church. There inevitably will be conflicts and disagreements wherever two or three gathered, and that certainly includes the church. For a community to be successful, there has to be an acknowledgement that different viewpoints will be present and there has to be a place for differing viewpoints to be expressed. We will not all agree on everything. And that’s OK. To use the biblical image, the body has different parts, and the body needs different parts in order to function well.

Of course, that’s all easier said than done. Jesus’ teaching in this passage underscores how difficult it can be to consider different viewpoints within the community.

Yet God has gathered us together. Relentlessly, God gathers us together. The diversity of the community speaks to the diversity that is within the very being of God. The goal is not for us all to think alike. The goal is to worship and serve the God who has come among us in Jesus Christ—and to serve neighbors (of all kinds) who are created in God’s image.

Indeed, we are called to be *Christ-minded* but that does not necessarily mean that we will be *like-minded.* (In fact), I find it all enriching and inspiring, a present reminder that God is more than anyone of us can fully experience or express. Furthermore, we can combine our different gifts to accomplish far more together than we ever could alone. So it is with the whole congregation, the whole community.

But more than just recognizing and representing our *differences,* our community is sustained by holding fast to what we share *in common.* For the things that unite us are much stronger than the differences that could divide us. I am grateful to have a place within the body of Christ. I am grateful for what we share together. I’m even grateful for the differences among us, believing that God wouldn’t have it any other way.[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. Erin MacCreaigh, *In the Lectionary: Matthew 18:15-20,* The Christian Century, September 4, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kristin M. Swenson, *Shaping Heaven,* The Christian Century, September 1, 2008 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rutger Bregman, *Humankind: A Hopeful History,* Back Bay Books, NY, 2019, p. 358 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John Wurster, *Church is a Team Sport,* The Presbyterian Outlook, August 28, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)