

- Let's begin our reflection with some soul-searching questions. Is there someone in your life that has hurt you? Someone you have chosen to shut out of your life? Written them off?
- Is there someone whom you have offended; who has shut you out of their life? A family member, neighbor, co-worker? It may have been so long ago you can't remember them or can't remember why.
- Are there groups of people you shun because of differing religious or political viewpoints? People you avoid because of how they choose to live their lives? People you would just rather not spend the effort trying to understand or get along with- because you feel it is a "lost cause".
- This Sunday's readings challenge us to revisit our thinking and these relationships.
- If you look up the definition of the word "reconciliation" this is what you will find: "the restoration of friendly relations; bringing into balance; fence mending; restoring peace."
- And today's scripture readings call each of us to examine our relationships: our relationships with each other and with God. In particular we are called to look at those strained or troubled or broken relationships and to bring them back into balance, mend the fence, restore the peace.
- But beyond our own personal relationships, we are called to take action as a church community, whenever we see someone starting down a sinful path, a path that will harm their relationships with others and with God.
- This is not easy business in today's world so let's look to our readings for guidance.
- Our first reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel sets the bar high. In it we are told that if we see someone heading down the wrong path, we have the absolute obligation to let them know it and to offer help to them. If we say nothing, do nothing; God will hold us responsible for our inaction. In other words, we may or may not be able to change the situation for the better – but we must try!

- This responsibility comes with some tough questions: “ If I must do this, how do I do it? How do I not look like I am “butting in”, not minding my own business? How do I know what is the right thing to do or say? How do I not give the impression I am better or know better than someone?”
- These are tough questions, questions that might cause us to just give up. But our second reading and our Gospel reading provide us the answers to these questions.
- In our second reading St. Paul lays out the general rule for reconciling our own relationships and helping other reconcile their relationships with others and with God. Here is the general rule: Whatever it is you say or you do; do it with gentleness, with kindness; with love. There is no one set of magic words that make it all right, but there is a magic formula – let the person feel loved, important and cared for. No change or reconciliation can happen without this foundation.
- Our Gospel reading today comes from the middle of chapter 18 of Matthew’s Gospel. In this Gospel passage we find Jesus giving what appears to be three very specific, simple rules about how to go about reconciliation with others. But to fully understand what Jesus is saying we need to look at what is going on in chapter 18 just before today’s passage and just after today’s passage.
- The verses just before today’s reading tell the parable of the ninety-nine sheep and the one that went astray, emphasizing the importance of the individual person to God. Nobody is expendable. Every person matters and tremendous effort must be taken to “find the lost sheep”. It reminds us if God gives us such care and love and forgiveness we must give the same to each other.
- In the verses just after today’s passage, Peter asks Jesus how many times must he forgive a person. Peter wants to know how much effort must he put in to restoring relationships. Jesus tells Peter that the requirement for forgiveness is beyond calculation.
- In this chapter, Matthew recalls sayings of Jesus that emphasize the importance of Christians living together in harmony. Not only for our individual well being, but for the peace and well being of

our church community. If one person suffers we all suffer, if one person falls away the whole church is weakened.

- That principle sets us Christians apart from today's world, where people are more inclined to emphasize individual rights rather than our responsibilities to each other. In today's world, people often walk away from relationships quickly and easily. Rather than allowing us to just walk away, Jesus calls us to explore possibilities that might lead to reconciliation. He outlines a deliberate, intentional process. He will not let us easily off the hook, but requires us to take the initiative.
- Let's look at the process Jesus sets out.
- If we become aware of sin, whether or not directed against us, we have a responsibility to take action and try to help. The first step is to pray over the matter, to invite God into the situation for help and guidance.
- Then Jesus urges us to first speak to the individual on a one to one basis. But as our second reading reminds us we must go in a spirit of gentleness—having carefully invited the Holy Spirit to prepare us to go in love.
- If the problem is still not resolved in a one on one manner, Jesus says to carefully choose and invite a small group of others: calm, level headed, caring people, to assist us in our efforts. Others can add a measure of wisdom—two or three heads are better than one—and lend a measure of importance and seriousness to the situation—it is easier for someone to dismiss the opinion of one person but perhaps not the counsel of two or three. It is also possible that others will help us to see the hurt, the offense in a less harsh light. They might even help us see our part, in causing the broken relationship. In any event, the goal is not to fix blame but rather to remove the sin and to restore the relationship.
- If the conflict cannot be resolved during this second intervention, Jesus calls for the matter to be brought to a more public forum for help. In Jesus' time the Church or community assembly carried out that role. Today, the church can still fill that role offering counseling, mediation and spiritual guidance if both parties are open to seeking help.
- If all of these efforts at reconciliation still fail, we see Jesus advising us to just keep praying in His name. Pray for the

person, pray for a change of heart (for the person and for ourselves). Jesus tells us prayer is powerful.

- We can and should pray on our own, but today's Gospel passage concludes by reminding us of the power of group prayer, especially when we gather together as Church.
- Our reading reminds us that coming together in prayer, in Jesus' name, multiplies the power of prayer- because Jesus tells us He is really present with us in that gathering. Close, interested and listening.
- When we pray together as a church, as prayer groups, as parents there is tremendous power. If a father and mother gather in Jesus' name to pray for their child, Jesus is present! And wondrous things happen!
- So let's return to our initial questions.
- Is there someone in your life that has hurt you? Someone you have chosen to shut out of your life? Is there someone whom you have offended; who has shut you out of their life?
- Are there groups of people you shun because of differing religious or political viewpoints? People you avoid because of how they choose to live their lives? People you would just rather not spend the effort trying to understand or get along with because you feel it is a "lost cause".
- Whether we are the offended or the offender, Jesus tells us, we are to take the initiative to bring about reconciliation. Jesus doesn't allow us to leave the wound untended, whether we inflicted the wound or are among those who have been wounded. He makes us the responsible person for taking the first step to bring healing and restore the peace.
- But He assures us we don't take that first step alone. He walks right beside us.
- Who will you reach out to today?