Communities through Christ

At the start of a new academic year, I always find myself reflecting on the meaning of community. As the CBU community welcomes new students, faculty and staff and helps them become part of our family, I watch with amazement new relationships being formed and knowing that personal and professional successes will surely stem from them.

While communities provide us a sense of belonging, support and the opportunity to be part of something larger than ourselves, they often also are a source of conflict that is natural and unavoidable. It is this conflict within the community that the Disciple Matthew addresses in 18:15-20. In this reading, Matthew provides insight for us as to how Christ wants us to resolve these conflicts. He meticulously outlines the progressive steps that Christ inspires us to use when conflict arises within our communities.

Christ first tells us: If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. When a friend, family member or co-worker acts in a manner that is inconsistent with the teachings of Christ, many of us would rather look the other way. We prefer to stay out of it, mind our own business, and not deal with it. We do so to avoid conflict. At the other extreme, some of us would rather spread the news without care or concern that gossiping can do much damage to one's hard-earned reputation. In Matthew's Gospel, Christ encourages us to confront conflict head on: be discrete but be direct. This may be especially difficult if you do not know the individual very well. However, people do appreciate a chance to explain, if not correct their behavior. Christ further tells us that if the individual is receptive to you pointing out the fault, you will have made a friend. How wonderful for both of you!

If the individual is not receptive to one-on-one, Christ further instructs us:

But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

Involving others in the fruitful resolution of a difficult situation is important not because you want to shame people into action but because we as individuals have a responsibility to our collective well-being. When a fellow human being is not living up to the values of our community, we have to make an effort to bring them back in. When someone is taking a while to come around, we need to enlist our friends, family or co-workers and go to them.

If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church.

The good thing about being a part of a wider Christian community is that when we ourselves cannot get through to a fellow human being, we can always turn to our religious community for help. Where persistence and care
are helpless, communion and prayer come to the rescue. We can always count on our Church to remind us that as we deal with difficult situations, we must abandon all judgment and turn to endless love and compassion: to cope, to mend, to overcome.

You, others, and the Church community have tried without success to resolve the conflict. Now what? Christ tells us:

,"And if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

What difficult advice to heed! However, in Matthew's Gospel, Christ leaves no room for interpretation.

"Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Despite conflict, difficulties and misunderstandings, being a member of a community is a powerful thing. Together, we are capable of affecting what occurs here on earth and in heaven. When we face an issue, we must trust both ourselves and our respective communities to effectively resolve it through the lovingly grace of Christ. The power of community ...use it wisely, prudently and with compassion.

"For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."