

Two features stand out to me in today's reading. First, the necessity for deep listening in order to maintain community; second, the self-fulfilling nature of our expectations of our community. And of course, they're related.

Matthew situates this teaching in a section that's all about hospitality, searching, vulnerable people, and forgiveness. Right before this reading Jesus talked about the need to become like a child, and how scrupulous we must be not to mislead or devalue "little ones," by which he means those of low status, whether because they're simple or because they're humble, or for any other reason. He says that any shepherd of 100 sheep will drop everything to find one that's missing, and rejoices when the sheep is found. Right after this reading, Peter asks Jesus how often he's going to have to forgive another member of the community, and Jesus says seventy-seven times, which is way too much for most of us. So today's reading about conflict in community comes in the context of care for the vulnerable and grace for one another.

The instructions Jesus gives for when another church member harms you is that you should bring it up when just the two of you are together, and if there's no change, then bring a buddy along to back you up. If the person refuses to listen, you escalate and tell the whole church, and if they still won't listen, you "let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector," which may mean you ask them to leave the church, although I'll also point out that Jesus hung out with gentiles and tax collectors all the time, so he clearly doesn't mean that you dehumanize the other or try to ruin their life. It's not a good idea to take this instruction as a template to be followed in every instance, because obviously there are power differentials and other variables that would make it inappropriate in every case. But what the instruction does

do is draw our attention to the fact that community members *can* harm each other, and that often the reaction to being confronted is to get defensive and even consolidate one's own sense of rightness.

This reminds me of the Dunning-Kruger Effect, which was described in 1999 by a couple of psychologists who noted that, as Charles Darwin put it, "Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than knowledge does." The Dunning-Kruger Effect is a cognitive bias such that you believe you are smarter and more capable than you actually are, and you lack the insight or metacognition to recognize that you don't know enough to justify your confidence. It's alarming and exasperating to deal with in a person of limited intelligence, who cannot see why the decisions they're making are dangerous. It's annoying to deal with in its manifestation as mansplaining, when, classically, a man explains a woman's own book to her at a cocktail party. Or when a relative dominates Thanksgiving dinner with an ill-informed diatribe about politics that reveals their ignorance and bias. But the Dunning-Kruger effect also lurks more subtly behind our snap decisions to downplay what another person is saying because we just don't think they have much to offer. They might be one of the "little ones" of whom Jesus speaks—people who don't carry much weight and are automatically discounted because of age or race or social status.

I said a couple weeks ago that people in positions of power like the governor or members of the police force had a moral obligation to take pains to be respectful to the opponents of theirs who have less power. I'm saying another version of that now. We all need to be cognizant of our relative status or power, and listen harder than usual to complaints or dissent from those who are habitually discounted. We're all smart and compassionate, but the

world is so complicated that it takes me by surprise all the time.

The other thing that stood out to me in today's reading was this claim by Jesus that whatever we bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever we loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Not sure exactly how to parse that out, but it sounds to me like we form the worlds we live in by the way we live in them. There's a story about Nasrudin, the wise fool of Sufi tradition, that expresses this:

A stranger stops Nasrudin at the city gates. "Will you tell me," says the stranger, "what Baghdad is like? I have to move to a city and I'm worried." Nasrudin replies, "Tell me about the place you came from." "Oh, it was a wonderful place! Neighbors were kind to one another, we looked out for the children, people shared and were generous and happy!" "Ah!" said Nasrudin. "You will love Baghdad. Don't worry at all, and welcome!"

Later on, another stranger stops Nasrudin at the city gates. "Will you tell me," says the stranger, "what Baghdad is like? I have to move to a city and I'm worried." Nasrudin replies, "Tell me about the place you came from." "Oh, it was a terrible place! Thieving and fornication and children noisy and running wild. People are selfish and distrustful." "Ah!" said Nasrudin. "You will dislike Baghdad. You'd better move on to another city!"

Obviously the hometown was wonderful because the person speaking about it practiced kindness and generosity, and their actions were contagious. But I think also that careful listening and respect for others are part of what makes a wonderful hometown, because when you know you're listened to and taken seriously, you have more confidence in your neighbors.

Suzanne Guthrie, an Episcopal priest in northern California, writes:

I sometimes wonder if heaven, if there is a heaven, is created by our consciousness, our actions, our love, our self-sacrifice. "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Our polluted, exploited earth begets a barren, poisoned heaven. Our humility and awe and cooperation with nature creates our paradise. Our war-making or peace-making here determines the state of being there. Our exclusion excludes us and our inclusion includes us all. If so, our actions, cooperation, sacrifices, and love binds and loosens consequences more far-reaching and vital than imagined. Even the smallest moral victories and heroics of daily life may link each of us to the unfolding plane of consciousness, unleashing forces of good and evil.

Let us pray:

God of the small and the scorned, we pray that we may learn from one another about your all-encompassing love. You constantly surprise us when we are mindful enough to get off of auto-pilot. Give us the bumpers we need when we're not at our best and we *are* just coasting, but also, dear God, help us get better at staying awake and alert and picking up the links to your unfolding kingdom. Amen.