

The Power of Community

Fr. Greg Heille, September 13, 2026

St. Cronan Church – 10:00 Mass

There is a cumulative wisdom in scripture, especially I think in the letters of St. Paul, and in our cumulative Christian experience that says that the Christian life is not to be lived private or alone. It's to be lived in community. And it's so important that we have community, that if we don't have it, we need to work to find it. And if we can't find it, we even have to work to create it.

But it's interesting that we're now in a part of Matthew's gospel, it's chapter 18, which is a speech that Jesus is giving about community. And interestingly, he gives this speech shortly after he says to the disciples, to be my disciple, you must take up your cross and follow me. We must take up the cross of community and go up to Jerusalem with Jesus, Matthew says.

We all know the importance in our relationships, our families, our committed relationships, even in our workplace, certainly in a parish community, the importance of encounter, which a friend of mine defines as person-to-person transforming experience. We are transformed in our encounter with one another, all the better when it's face-to-face encounter with one another. And when we hang in with one another for the long haul, We rub up against one another. And that's good news, the scripture says, 77 times, rub up against one another. That's where we see ourselves reflected more clearly, we come to understand ourselves. That's where we grow in insight and in virtue. And that's where we mirror back to others who they are and help them to grow in insight and in virtue. And together in this rubbing up against each other in community, is where we hear corporately the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to the church, speaking to us. We are the body of Christ in the world, and the Holy Spirit is speaking in our encounters. That would be enough.

However, we live in a world that triggers us, how many times in one day triggers us. And our Old Testament passage from Sirach today says, "Wrath and anger are hateful things, and yet we hug them tight." The world triggers us, and we hug it. We are in a world of social media, of 24/7 news, of speed that triggers us. And it becomes virtually an addiction to us. And it comes home to us in our encounters with one another in relationships and in community. When we come to one another for a blessing, we are triggered by hateful wrath, Sirach says. We are so caught up in the dopamine jolt of anger and wrath that we become accustomed to it, and we become angry, we become anxious, we even become isolated in relationship and community. We can be here, but not be here.

If Jesus had a cell phone and 24/7 cable news, I bet he would have said 70 times 77. We are in a rat race, it feels like, of having to let go of the influences that would bring us down and make us useless to one another as Christians in community and in relationship. And so our gospel passage talks about forgiveness. Our psalm talked about mercy. Our first reading talked about forgiveness. Forgiveness is good news, and having to do it 77 times every day, 24/7, for life. We are Christians until we die. It's good news to be in relationship with one another and to be putting up with one another and to be struggling to find our equilibrium in the midst of the world in which we live.

I like the expression slow dopamine. The world wants to jolt us with a fast kick of dopamine, and it just burns our brains out. We're in it together for slow dopamine, for a real conversation, for a meal together, for a walk in the park, for a day at the beach, for a trip to the gym, for a conversation with a co-worker. We're in it together for the slow dopamine of the difficult conversations. They don't feel good in the doing, but they feel good in having done them. When we hang together in good times and in bad, to be the body of Christ in person-to-person transforming encounter, we give the Holy Spirit room to regulate us, body, mind, and spirit. We give God the opportunity to have mercy on us. We give God the chance to make us happy. We become noteworthy in the eyes of those who look upon us as someone or as a people of joy. What we're doing together by taking the trouble, the good trouble of being together is what our world is hungry for. And we could do the things we do as Christians for all the wrong reasons. Or we could be truly a prophetic presence of joy and of mercy and of love. It's a long game. It's a slow game. And it's a game that we are here because we like to play