

- *Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in their midst.*
 - Our readings today speak of the blessing and the importance of community, of coming together for prayer and worship and support.
 - Jesus makes perfectly clear His desire that we pray, and that we pray together as a community.
 - He didn't say "Where twelve or more are gathered," using the number of apostles he chose, or seventy-two, the number of disciples.
 - Where even two or three are gathered, Jesus is with us. God gives us every opportunity to share in His presence.

- Jesus calls us to communion with God AND with each other.
 - Jesus did not establish a federation of individuals. He established a Church, calling us to unite as one body, His Body, the Body of Christ. He knew that we would be infinitely stronger united, promising even to be with us.
 - Jesus saw in his Church – the Body of Christ - a community with the power to change lives, with the authority to instruct, to proclaim the truth in love, to forgive sins, a community with the power to transform the world through prayer.
 - We are part of that Church, part of His Body, a faith community, the pastorate of St Francis/St Mary/Holy Family.
 - This is not a theological treatise or an academic study but a reflection on the deeper spiritual reality that comes from our lived experience of community, both good and bad.

- It's why Jesus used the word "brother" in today's gospel and why He refers to God as Father, and not the distant, aloof, and angry father but *Abba*, the intimate form a child would use.

- These words are not mere accidents but by their very nature speak of the important bonds that we are to have in our community, a bond so tight and so vibrant that it is no less than another family for us.
- The community is to be for us the privileged place for coming to know God in Jesus Christ, for us to be transformed by the witness of the Gospel and our sisters and brothers, and then for us to grow in service of those in need, both within and beyond our community.
- The community **is** a privileged place to learn the faith, not as some distant doctrine, but as a lived experience of Jesus Christ, a God who seeks to be close to us and love us and strengthen us; a God who seeks to share with us the joy of knowing, loving, serving Him, of humbling ourselves before Him.
 - The community helps us to trust and to be trustworthy. What more important foundation could there be to building and deepening relationship with God who is always faithful trustworthy?
 - The community helps us to be grateful and to recognize the blessings that we have. What a great lesson in learning to understand how God works in our lives.
 - The community helps us to endure suffering (even if it's sometimes caused by the community itself), not just to withstand suffering but to find meaning and value in it, in the sacrifice of giving up and over for the other.
 - The community helps us depend on others and to share with them our gifts and talents.
- In our first reading, Ezekiel speaks a challenging part of the blessing of community: the obligation each bears for the other, the obligation to give witness to the truth, especially when it involves the conduct of those around us – members of our community.

- Am I my brother's keeper? My sister's keeper? Yes, and they are mine.
- It is not easy, especially keeping in mind that we do it for the good of the other, rather than to lift ourselves up out of pride or make ourselves feel better.

- Jesus picks up the same theme in the Gospel, reminding us that the context of any correction we offer is to be the community, to be our family, to wrap ourselves, wrap the other, in charity and service
 - We don't challenge another by rash judgment, gossip or condemnation. We begin with prayer, seeking to discern a way to address the challenge with directness and in charity. This is never easy.
 - It is far easier to talk **about** someone's problem than it is to talk to them about it in a way that is helpful to them
 - Jesus makes it clear that part of being together in His name, part of His being in our midst is the expectation that misdeeds and conflict are addressed by offering the opportunity for conversion.
 - The Jesus method of conflict resolution is not about applying pressure to the situation until your opponent confesses that she did you wrong. It's based on winning back your brother or sister.
 - It's about restoring an intimate relationship, about bringing the community together, not wringing justice from your opponent by turning up the heat.
 - So, if someone hurts us, instead of focusing on retribution for ourselves, we're motivated by love and concern for the wrongdoer. We speak to them privately. If the wrong continues, we enlist others—not as judge and jury—but to plead more persuasively – all of this done with love and respect.

- If that doesn't work, widen the circle of love, not the volume of accusation. If the injurer persists, then Jesus says treat the offender *as you would a Gentile or a tax collector*. Jesus didn't say to punish, shun, or excommunicate the person.
 - Again, none of this is easy but remember, *gentiles and tax collectors*, were the kind of folks Jesus would have dinner with and who He sought expressly!
 - Jesus never ceased to invite the lost, forsaken, neglected, or sinner back into the arms of God. He dared the righteous to throw the first stone, provided they were without sin, which of course, they knew they were not.

- It's the point that Paul makes in stating that love is to be our obligation for and to one another. No other commandment is necessary if we live this one perfectly: love God fully and my neighbor as myself.
 - There it is - Love – that must be at the center of every Christian community.
 - Paul knows that a Christian is not to an individual practitioner of private virtue, but a member of the Body of Christ, a member of his Church.
 - We must love others enough to risk our own comfort and at times our own well-being for the good of the other and of the whole community.
 - We show that love for the oppressed by speaking out for them.
 - We show that love for the oppressor by loving them too and calling them to conversion.
 - As a community of God's people, we owe each other love and nothing less.

- Today Jesus reminds us when even just two of us gather in His name, He is present. The omniscient, omnipotent God has tied Himself to us to make Himself immanently available to us.
 - These words bring us back to the true sense of community, the sacred nature of community, where we gather together and around Jesus.
 - Jesus makes it clear how important we are, one to another. We come together, we pray together, we work together, we stay together – in our Lord's name, bringing to focus the presence of God and unleashing the power of the Spirit – to transform our lives and the lives of all people, all God's children.
 - If we do this we become much more than simply the sum of our numbers. Two becomes more than two, and three becomes more than three.
 - Sure this is true of our time together here. It's why the Eucharist is central to our very existence, making this disparate group of individuals the living and breathing and serving and worshipping Body of Christ.
 - And it's also true of our community outside this building, in our daily lives, on those days when we are challenged by the other, when we can't stand the other, when we are fighting and angry, spiteful and hurting.
 - God is present because we are together as community, as a family. Christ is there because He seeks to love us, support us and strengthen us.
- It takes work to understand, appreciate and bring that Presence to the fore but nothing is more important.
 - Let us work then to bring Christ to bear in our community.
 - Let us pray to hear His call for us as a community and to strengthen one another to respond to that call.
 - Let's continue to build a community focused on making disciples, a community focused on sharing Christ who is present right here in our midst.