Background on Matthew 18:15-20

Matthew divided into five books to parallel the Torah:

- Sermons

- Miracles

- Parables

- Church life: how to live our daily life in Christ with one another

If Matthew's gospel had an index of topics, our gospel reading for today from Matthew 8:15-20, you would be under the topic: Fraternal correction, what to do if someone wrongs you. Then it would give your four steps to follow.

Step 1: the wronged person must act:

They should go directly to the person who has harmed you and talk with them about what harm has been done so that can be rectified. By going directly to them you respect yourself and the other person. (They may not have even known that they have hurt you.) It says that if the other person listens, you have won over your brother or sister.

But what do most persons do when they are wrong? They don't get together with the person who wronged them. They complain to every person they know. "Do you know what she did?

Do you know what he said?

They are just terrible a person!"

No, that's the wrong approach. Step one says <u>quite clearly</u>, if you are harmed, go directly and speak to the person that harmed you.

Step two: If after speaking to the person who wronged you, they do not listen to you, get one or two other persons and speak with the one who harmed you. It may be a counselor other family members. (example: a custom among some African tribes; members of a group; person from AA or NA to a person with a drug or alcohol problem)

Step three: If the person still refuses to hear them, bring them before the whole church.

Step four: If the person refuses to listen to the whole church treat him as a Gentile (foreigner) or a tax collector (traitor). You do not continue to let them harm you or the community.
The words in the Gospel of Matthew gives power for people to act in the name of Jesus in order to heal and reconcile. The power is given to EVERYBODY. Where two or three are present in my name, there am I in their midst.

But, how do we apply Matthew 18 to community life today? Every situation is not the same.

Example: Corpus Christi Parish worked out an agreement with the Head Start Program who rent our school to let the children in the neighborhood use the playground equipment behind the school. Last weekend I got a call from the convent that there is a fire in the playground area. A few of the neighborhood children lit a fire in a plastic trash can filled with debris. The sisters in the convent saw it and called the fire department. Then they got a number of buckets of water and put it out. By the time the fire department got here, the fire is already extinguished. The sound of the fire truck alerted the neighborhood that something has happened.

In words of today's gospel, what should we do if someone wrongs us? Call the police? Take revenge? Live in fear? No. Go to them and confront them with what they have done.

So here I am standing in the parking lot, the fire men are leaving, and who approaches me but a few of the youth who play in the park to let me know the names of the two young boys who lit the fire. They are little tykes, only nine or ten years old. Then a neighbor comes over and says, "I know where they live. Would you like me to go with you and talk with the families?

We walk down the street to the first family's house, knock on the door and a young boy comes out, at first denies that he has anything do with it and then confesses that he did help light the fire. We ask to see his parents. His mother comes to the door bewildered and then his father comes who is quite angry at the whole situation. We ask that they go and clean up the mess from the fire.

Then we visit another home and let the family know what has happened requesting that the young boy assist in cleaning up the debris from the fire. While we are at the second house we see the man from the first house we approached come out of the home and angrily walk down the street to clean up the mess caused by the fire.

He spends the next half hour cleaning up the mess. After he does so, the man stops at the rectory and says that he is sorry for getting so upset with me. We shake hands and he walks down the street.

PAUSE

Jesus' suggestion in this situation worked out quite well.

But Matthew's chapter 18's approach to how to respond to a disagreement will not work the same way in every place. Yet when we approach the person who has offended us, we are expressing respect for ourselves and for the other person. And if the Spirit of God is

present, and if we listen closely to each other and are open to each other, God will work out some way to take care of our conflict.

Obviously, we don't face budding pyromaniacs every day, but, as an urban church, are called to be more creative than ever before. We cannot simply stay within our four walls and expect our society to change and heal. We need to engage our world, face our problems and find ways to peace and reconciliation. That is why our parish has set aside $10,000 a year for three years and are taking a lead role in forming a community organization in our neighborhood. We need to confront our challenges in a Christian way.

It is because of words like Matthew 18 that we open our gym to young adult men on Sundays, it is why we open rooms in our school to block clubs and neighborhood organizations to meet and plan their activities. Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst. And surely the work of forming a caring community is the work of God.

PAUSE

I would like to ask you, members of Corpus Christi Parish, a question: how are we doing in our outreach to establish the Kingdom of God in our neighborhood?

How well do we help reduce conflict and establish peace in our community?

Well, to be honest, we are doing MUCH better than the majority of churches in the city who simply hold their services on Sunday and then close up for the week. However, I sometimes feel our community has one foot in the traditional way of being a modern urban parish, that is, totally ignoring our surroundings and another foot directly involved in turning around the very spirit of the neighborhood in whose midst we praise God. (example: the parishioners living near O'Hair Park who thanked me for all the parish is doing in the community)

We might ask, "What more could we do?" " How could we be more present to bring the peace and reconciliation which Jesus calls for in today's gospel?"

Let me give you an example from our Detroit Clergy Community Alliance walk last Friday night in the streets of Highland Park. (explain) We were on Hamilton Street, a few blocks from beautifully built apartments and condos. However, most buildings on the street we walked were torn down. Just a few were left on each block; they were mostly small party stores where people were busily coming and going to purchase needed items they needed.

Near one of the stores was a gathering of about 20 people. There was a grill barbequing food and a big pot of something that smelled very good. A group of people were sitting around a picnic table enjoying life. A sign hung near them declaring that this was "a drug free zone". It was actually a gathering of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotic Anonymous people who were having a good time. No alcohol, no drugs, just carving out a small place in the midst of this abandoned space for God's people to dwell.

As is the custom of our Friday night group, we stopped, formed a circle and invited them to pray with us for peace for their families, the neighborhood and our city. There was obviously much peace and reconciliation happening in that group.

PAUSE

I do not know what your role as an individual or in your household may be in establishing peace and ending conflict.
I do not know exactly what our role as a parish is either. But I DO know from today's gospel that where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst, establishing peace and ending conflict. May we continue our work until what is bound in heaven may be established on earth.