

September 10, Ordinary 23A (Matthew 18:15-20)

## **The only place in the Gospels where Jesus says anything about the church is Matthew 18—and not insignificantly, he brings it up in terms of conflict management.**

by [Erica MacCreaigh](#) in the [September 2023](#) issue

If the North American Christian church goes extinct—it won't, but bear with me—it won't be marauding infidels or nationalistic idolatries that do it. It will be coffee creamer.

The bitterest dispute I ever witnessed began with a suggestion that the church begin buying fair-trade coffee for after-worship fellowship time. The pastor, unfortunately too distracted by preaching the gospel and visiting the sick, didn't know about the coffee mafia (as they came to be known), nor the consequences of going against them. She gave the change her blessing.

Twelve bags of fair-trade coffee arrived soon thereafter and were set prominently next to the coffee mafia's two R2D2-sized coffee urns. But to the great disappointment of some that Sunday, the coffee mafia refused to use the new brand.

Later that week in the pastor's office, the coffee mafia bewailed (a) not having been consulted about the change and (b) the new coffee's extravagant expense. The pastor assured them that no ill will was intended and suggested that they speak to the carafe crashers (as the offenders came to be known).

Jesus said little about the church. His interest was reform and revival of temple worship and the devotional life of the Jewish people. The only place in the Gospels where Jesus says anything about the church is Matthew 18—and not insignificantly, he brings it up in terms of conflict management.

Business gurus say the best problem-solving is quick, is direct, and happens at the lowest possible level. In this week's Gospel lesson, Jesus says the same thing, except he would add *discreetly*. People who identify problems should address them privately, humbly, and respectfully. He's not just giving us a command here. He's giving us permission, empowering us to solve problems interpersonally, which is to say, face-to-face.

Alas, the great coffee massacre (as it came to be known) did not play out that way. Rather than talk with the carafe crashers, the coffee mafia hid the 12 bags of new coffee in the church basement, in the same cupboard where old china went to die. The following week, the pastor entertained the complaints of the carafe crashers.

"Didn't anyone come talk to you?" the pastor asked. The answer was no. So the pastor suggested that the carafe crashers enlist the java jousters (as they came to be known), two trusted members of the congregation who also happened to like good coffee, to join them in meeting with the coffee mafia.

It's important to note that the first-century church for which Matthew's Gospel was written could not have fathomed a future church so spectacularly self-entitled that beverages would bring it to the brink of schism. Jesus is talking about real sin in our reading, not differences of opinion or style. Changing coffee is not a sin—it pains me to have to specify this—even factoring in the oversight of getting brand buy-in from all stakeholders. But self-assertion that sneaks around and undermines others flies in the face of a way of life that demands humility, forbearance, and forgiveness. *That* is the behavior Jesus wants his people to address quickly, directly, discreetly, and at the lowest possible level.

Needless to say, the crashers and jousters did not talk with the coffee mafia, but two grueling days of detective work did unearth the hidden coffee cache. The crashers emptied the old coffee containers and filled them with the new coffee. The coffee mafia was not fooled. When Sunday came, the lamentable swill issuing from the coffee urns was almost as clear as water. Two days later, the disputants came before the church council.

In impressively Solomonic fashion, the council proposed a compromise: blend the standard sturdy grind with the fair-trade grind. The coffee mafia wailed that the expense of the new coffee remained unjustifiable, and the carafe crashers moaned that the piquant rainforest flavors of the new coffee would be irretrievably

compromised.

Jesus tells his followers to treat an unrepentant sinner in the church “as a gentile and a tax collector.” Let’s not forget that most of Jesus’ followers over the centuries have been gentiles. As for tax collectors, Jesus called one to be his disciple. He ate with them, inviting himself into their homes and defending not only his right but his responsibility to be there when respectable members of society complained about the company he chose to keep.

Jesus didn’t advocate punishing or putting people out of the church. His stance was unerringly patient, interpersonal, and breathtakingly kind.

Gnashing their teeth, the coffee mafia and carafe crashers submitted to the church council’s will. The great coffee massacre drew to a close.

A month later, an unidentified party swapped soy-based coffee creamer for half-and-half.

Where two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name, there he is among them. It’s a good thing, too. We need him to referee.