

A Sufficient Presence

Matthew 18:15-20
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The Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

How wonderful to return from summer break and gather once again on this Rally Sunday. The choirs are back and the Sunday school is enrolling children. They are meeting their teachers, the climbing wall is here and the bouncy toys have been inflated. The picnic on the lawn following the service is being prepared and the weather is perfect for the day.

And the Common Lectionary provides us with a text from Matthew's gospel, for this inaugural Sunday in the new church year, about church members living in conflict with one another—of them fighting and disagreeing with one another, and yet offering a formula for handing their disputes. It's almost as if to say, "Let's begin a new program year acknowledging our problems."

But maybe it's the dose of reality we need. Jesus is speaking rather matter-of-factly as he spells out a process, signaling a kind of inevitability to it all. But then he reminds them to always call upon the Lord and, that wherever two or three are gathered together in his name, he would be among them.

We all know the old saying, "There is strength in numbers." Well, that saying is true both literally and metaphorically. There can be no doubt that a great number of people, coming together and marshaling their collective voice and influence, can accomplish great things. But it is also true that just a couple of people coming together in the right spirit, can also have a huge impact and make a real difference.

And I think this is the point Jesus was making. That it's not about a throng or a mob. It is not dependent on the size of the crowd. In fact it's almost just the opposite. It's where two or three are gathered in his name that the Lord will be present among them. And think about that on this Rally Sunday.

That in a world that at times seems confusing and out of control even—a world where the forces of destruction and corrupting influences seem to be in the hands of the wrong people, and where the great instruments of change and progress seem positioned to benefit those who already have an advantage, it is so easy to become discouraged—to become cynical and give up hope that things will ever change. It is not hard at all to become convinced that peace will always remain elusive and that justice will never come rolling down like that mighty stream we were promised.

And why should we expect the world to be any different when we in the church have our own divisions, and where not everyone who professes Jesus as Lord is singing out of the same hymnbook. I have made my views abundantly clear from this pulpit how I feel about today's preachers of a false gospel—these so called Evangelical "religious leaders" who wrap themselves in the mantle of Christianity to justify a mean-spirited political agenda of intolerance that in no way reflects the very basic teachings of Christ.

And yet they speak. They pronounce. They declare with such certainty what is the mind of God. And they hurt many people.

We are only human. We often feel insecure and can be easily influenced. We are so susceptible to being misled and to accept lies as truth. And it can be extremely discouraging. And yet, while I may find it all so maddening, in today's text, Jesus seems to be rather realistic about conflicts, at least in the church.

He tells those listeners that after they have exhausted all options and attempts at reconciliation, as a final step, they are to treat those with whom they are at odds, as Gentiles and tax collectors. That's supposed to sound comforting on the surface. That's intended to sound like permission to write them off and have nothing more to do with them. But when it sinks in a little deeper, and you remember that Jesus actually welcomed Gentiles, and broke bread and dined with the despised tax collectors, that's not what Jesus is saying at all. So it's a challenge to us in terms of how we are to live in the same church, in the same neighborhood, in the same community with those with whom we have significant differences.

And on the eve of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, the church has not always handled its internal disagreements well. That is certainly true today. Attempts to purify the church by imposing litmus tests and splitting it apart have always been problematic.

We have our version of truth, our correct reading of scripture and our own Jesus. It's not that we hate you, we don't. We are actually very concerned about you and love you. But because of our strong faith convictions, we're just going to go over here and leave you over there—living in utter darkness and damnation.

Ultimately, that serves no one. I'd rather be in a church with people I don't always agree with, who are different from me and from one another, but who are open and receptive to one another and to learning new things about others and therefore themselves. Isn't the world divided enough? Aren't we fractured into tiny pieces already? Aren't we already too tribalistic for our own good?

And sometimes I fear that the virtual worlds we inhabit with more frequency, only makes things worse—they only polarize us more. When the religious and political leanings of our Facebook friends merely mirror our own, or when our only news sources come from those outlets that affirm our already held beliefs and assumptions, we are creating something of our own version of reality.

Yahoo chat groups of those who like what I like and own what I own may, on some level, reassure me that I'm not alone in the world. But joining a virtual community based on our mutual like of the same television show or because we drive the same make of car isn't really enough to sustain me, at least, as being part of a true community.

I always want to caution myself against the seduction of familiarity and from dabbling recreationally in the narcotic of going unchallenged in my thinking and beliefs. We need human connections and interaction to do that. We need the intimacy and nurture that comes from being known. And I have to believe that when Jesus said that where two or three are gathered together in his name, he would be among them, he was telling us that we need one another. At a basic, human level, we need to be in community with others.

It is my sense that there are a lot of lost and lonely people in the world today. And this, despite the ways in which through technology we are interconnected. Never have we been more connected and yet isolated and lonely. Never have we had the freedom to travel and move about, and yet felt so lost. Never have we been more powerful and yet so scared. Never have we had so much and yet felt so empty. And never have we had access to more information and known so much, and yet felt so uncertain about everything.

You know, those early Christians, struggling in an uncertain world, a world that seemed hostile to them and their beliefs, and who were struggling to find their way, must have felt extremely confused and lost—overwhelmed at times. They must have felt like they were swimming upstream against a current that was stronger than their ability to fight it. And at times, it must have been exhausting.

And to that, Jesus said where even two or three of you gather together in my name, it will be sufficient and I will be present among you. But you've got to gather. You've got to come together.

Most of us leave this world vulnerable and weak, the way we came into it. And we need the love and support of others to survive. Well, we need that same love and support throughout our lives, not just at their beginning and ending. We need that in order to make it—to survive. And we need one another because it's what makes us better humans.

Today is Rally Sunday. It's a term some churches have stopped using for the opening Sunday of a new program year. I think the rationale for dropping the term is that it harkens back to a different time and era. That it's basically an admission that over the summer months, the church goes into something of a hibernation period, as people are away at cabins and on vacation and otherwise distracted. And while that's not entirely true, there is some truth to it.

But I want to name Rally Sunday and claim it. Because if there has ever been a time when I feel we need to rally, to come together as a community, it is now. We need to gather with one another and declare our love and support for the church and for one another. And I'd like to believe that our weekly coming together is a rallying cry, proclaiming in the midst of a chaotic and confusing world the strength we draw by being in community with others—to not live in lonely isolation but to be with others, even as they are with us.

To stand with those we've known for a long time and those we have recently met. To stand alongside those who are hurting and grieving the way they stood alongside you when you were too. And to celebrate and share in the joy of others as they have shared in your joys. To allow our collective lives to intersect with one another.

I hope that despite the things taking place in our world, from unprecedented natural disasters, political chaos and foolishness, and escalating talk of war, that we can come together in this place, *not* in order to retreat from the world, but as a way finding ourselves in the presence of God, encouraged and strengthened to live in the world as Christ would have us live.

Faithfully. Confidently. Hopefully...and with one another.

Amen.