



SEPTEMBER 10, 2023

Pentecost 15

Matthew 18: 15-20

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Where two or three are gathered....

Greetings dear friends, brothers, sisters, sibling in Christ. Grace and peace to you in the name of Christ. What a delight it is to join you again this year through the ELCIC summer sermon series. Heartfelt thanks to our National church staff who enable this series to happen, providing an opportunity for Bishops and Assistants to the Bishops to proclaim the gospel to many congregations across the provinces and possibly offering some reprieve to our rostered leaders.

I am Rev. Prema Samuel, serving as the Assistant to the Bishop for Congregational Life of the Synod of Alberta & the Territories. I come to you today from the beautiful Camp Kuriakos, located on banks of Sylvan Lake on Treaty 6 territory, a traditional meeting grounds, gathering place, and travelling route to the Cree, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, Métis, Dene and Nakota Sioux. With gratitude and thanksgiving, we acknowledge the many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit whose footsteps have marked these lands for centuries. I am grateful for the traditional Knowledge Keepers and Elders who are still with us today and those who have gone before us. I make this acknowledgement as an act of reconciliation and gratitude to those whose territory I reside on or am visiting. I invite you take moment to remember in thanksgiving the land in which you join us and the peoples who have marked the land with wisdom and grace.

Please join me in hearing the Gospel according to Matthew, the 18th chapter beginning with verse 15.

Glory to you, O Lord

“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

This is the Gospel of our Lord Jesus.

Praise to, O Christ

It is hard not to look at some of the churches that neighbor us and wonder what they are doing right, and we are doing wrong. Their church seems so much fuller than ours. We hear stories of all the cool programs that they are running and all the people who they are drawing in and then we look at our own church. Too often we see the reflections of what we once were, a community church that brought the generations together and acted as a center point to the lives of many. We remember those days and we look now and see more empty pews than full pews and wonder what we have done wrong. What choice did we make that led us down this path? Why are so many of our churches ready to fold in a matter of years? We look around and mourn for the lost days of community glory, the days that we wish could return.

It is hard not to mourn, but even in our morning, God is still there. God is still there, offering us some measure of peace, even as the institutional life of our church seems to be numbered. And the peace that God is offering is not a false promise that the ELCIC will rise again to former states of glory. It is not a promise that we will find a way to preserve the churches we still have left and help them to grow in number once more. The promise we receive is much simpler and much more powerful. The promise is this. The Holy Spirit is with us and where two or three are gathered, God is present.

Where two or three are gathered. In fact, some of the most powerful stories of Jesus come from those moments when he is just with his disciples or healing a person or preaching to a small gathering. He is present even in the most intimate of gatherings. God is most certainly present in the gathering of a small group of people, where we can share one another's stories, our burdens, and our joys.

Where two or three are gathered....

That isn't to say that any of this will save our churches. It is simply to say that God is present in the life of community, even when that community can barely fill the first two pews of a church. God is a lover of community. God is found there in truly poignant ways, whether there are 3000 or three. And that is the promise that we are asked to hold on to. God with us, even when the old structures slide into ruin and the old ways turn into memory.

Community, in whatever form that it takes, is so important to God that we even have Jesus offering us a means to hold that community together. It is a process that is meant to reconcile harm done by people within a community. It is a multi-step process that is meant to give a relationship all the chance in the world to succeed but it also acknowledges that in the end, if reconciliation is not possible, then sometimes ending a relationship is the only option left. It is a hard truth offered by the text. Sometimes, community cannot be salvaged due to various reasons. It is lamentable, but unavoidable when our own brokenness precludes reconciliation. Such a split may in fact save a great deal of grief and prevent further damage to a community.

Jesus does not romanticize the idea of community, and neither should we. Community is hard work, but it is holy work. Sometimes, oftentimes, community changes. It shifts from what we once knew. It grows smaller, it loses members that need to seek community elsewhere, it morphs into something we may not recognize. But always, the promise is there, God's promise, assuring us that God is with us. Anywhere that two or three have gathered. And so, we continue the good, hard, holy work of community, in church and throughout our lives.

There was a church, one of ours, that was diminishing in size and had been for a long time. They were dealing with hurt and anger over a few controversial decisions and decided to take one last chance at staying a church where they were. It wasn't an easy decision and in hindsight, it didn't change anything. They still closed and the site upon which they existed is now completely gone.

But in those few years they gave themselves, they did many wonderful things. Already engaged in the community, they continued their good work, even finding some new avenues of ministry. They celebrated the Eucharist together and they laughed together. They argued together and they ate together. They celebrated the birth of Jesus every Christmas, and they celebrated Good Friday and Easter Sunday every spring. They invited guest speakers and hosted meals for their community and there was God in their midst, even when some Sundays saw all of 15-20 people in the pews. And they helped train a new seminary grad in the realities of pastoral ministry, a pastor who would go on and continue to serve, remembering always the lessons learned at their first pastoral call.

This could describe a lot of churches in their final years. And that is the point. There was something beautiful about the way they continued as community, even when it became apparent that their hope of remaining where they were was not going to bear fruit. They did so much good in those last years. And in the end, when a church decides to just open up and embrace all that makes it what it is, it can still do and be wonderful things. It can still be an instrument of grace in the world, because God is with that church, no matter how small, just as assuredly as God is with the large church.

To be clear, the small church may well disappear. It may close its doors and its property might be sold and any physical reminder of the space it once inhabited might be erased. There is still thanksgiving for the existence of the congregation and the love it embodied. But the good that the community did still exists, and those who are a part of it can find other communities and they can continue living out God's call.

It might be hard to hear, but it is something we must accept. The church is changing, and much will be lost as it does. It will be easy to mourn and right to mourn when that moment comes. But it we can't stay in that moment.

I was recently watching a movie where one character was lamenting the fact that another of the main characters had died to save her life. She was racked with guilt. "She is dead because of me." But another character quickly responded with "No. You are alive because of her." Now, that has nothing to do with what I have been talking about save this. It is easy to look at the life of the church and say, as the character did "Our church is dying because we didn't do this or make that decision." Rather, as the second character in the movie reframed it, perhaps it is better to say "Because we were a church, all of this good happened and we worshipped together, and we laughed together, and we gave thanks to God together. Thanks be to God for that privilege and that joy."

It is easy to mourn what was lost, but to state it another way, this time with the words of Dr. Seuss. "Don't be sad it is over. Be glad that it happened."

May we treasure our community, no matter how small. May we know that we are still capable of doing what God has called us to do, through God's help. And may we give thanks for every moment of community that we enjoy with our siblings in Christ. For every moment we go spend with them is a true blessing.

Amen.