

Message: "God's Quorum"

Scripture: Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If the member 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. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, 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. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

It has become evident that there's an ongoing issue that need clarification in our church - and this is such an important issue that I have crafted a formal declaration that I will place before you and trust that you will agree to its dictates.

BE IT KNOWN AND AGREED UPON that the pastor of the First United Methodist Church is the one in complete, absolute, and undeniable charge of all programmatic, organizational, educational, theological, and spiritual aspects of the local congregation's operation. It is the pastor who is the CEO, the undisputed leader, the one who calls all the shots, the big cheese, the head honcho, the bottom-line drawer and the top idea conveyor. The duly-called and officially appointed clergy person is the one to whom all deference must be paid, all attention must be given, and all trust must be automatically given. No decision shall be made without the pastor's direct approval; no action shall be taken without the pastor's clear affirmation; and there shall be no forgetting that the pastor is due his or her obligatory donut during fellowship whether or not he or she is able to procure one for themselves. To summarize: the pastor has all the power. (continued on other side.....)

Are we clear on this? I hope we are - except that I noticed I left one important word off of that declaration, a word at the end. That word is "NOT!" (on back side?) - and this is something defined by divine decree, which we see laid out before us in our scripture passage today. And what is that decree? THAT WE DO THIS LIFE TOGETHER; that no one has special powers over anyone else; that we do the work necessary to maintain healthy community; and that we do these things especially when things get difficult.

Jesus is dealing with the challenges that happen in congregations where someone does something harmful to another. It might be something said or an action taken or a boundary crossed; whatever the issue, Jesus identifies it as a sin against us, a wrong committed to our detriment. A procedural protocol is then

described, moving strategically from dealing with the transgression directly through one-on-one conversation; but then, if there is no progress, moving on to include one or two more persons in the process; if there is still no progress, the entire church is to become involved; and, if there is still no progress, that person is to become, and I quote, "as a Gentile and tax collector to you." Ouch! Except, maybe not ouch, for how did Jesus counsel us to treat gentiles and tax collectors? How did he model a faithful response to those who wrong us? Was it not by loving them still, and loving them fully? To seek reconciliation and understanding and common ground? If nothing else, Jesus never advocated separation, even though in this passage it may sound like it; elsewhere, Jesus's counsel is clear - NEVER GIVE UP ON THE OTHER, whoever the other is, whatever the dividing issue is. It does not necessarily mean maintaining relationships with toxic individuals, but it does mean praying for them even as distance is warranted; it means never losing sight of their sacred worth.

That's a topic for another sermon, however, for what concerns us most directly here is Jesus's prescription for communal redress of wrongs, the key word being "communal." PLEASE NOTE THAT JESUS DID NOT COUNSEL THAT THE WRONGDOER SHOULD BE BROUGHT BEFORE THE FAITH COMMUNITY LEADER FOR JUDGEMENT! PLEASE NOTE THAT HE ADVOCATED PEERS, FELLOW CHURCH MEMBERS, AND FAITH COMMUNITY INDIVIDUALS TO JOIN TOGETHER TO DEAL WITH THE CHALLENGE. And a further point is obvious - TO COME TOGETHER IN THE MOTIVATION TO RECONCILE, AND NOT PUNISH.

We have thus arrived at the foundational teaching Jesus is presenting which he gives voice to in the last verse, a very common verse recited by Christians everywhere: "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." It's the "in my name" that stands out, for it changes the character, purpose, and process of the gathering completely. To do something "in the name of Jesus" is often meant to either establish authenticity to something or convince God to do something we want done. Many a church has dedicated a building or initiated a program by stating we do so "in the name of Jesus," hoping to induce a sort of sacred halo over the effort. This is well and good so long as the determination of the nature of the sacredness bestowed is left to God and not to us, which is something we find very hard to do. We want God to bless our efforts; but it remains God's prerogative and not ours to provide. More problematic is when someone invokes the name of Jesus to directly intercede in human affairs,

such as in miraculous healings or divine re-direction of certain physical realities. We've probably all heard or seen evangelistic healers attempt to cast out demons "in the name of Jesus" which provides good theater but is based on very poor theology and has very questionable results. I've heard preachers use "in the name of Jesus" to invoke God to make it rain, to stop wildfires, or to usher in a good crop; I've also heard "in the name of Jesus" as if to convince God to remove certain political figures, or to shame one's enemies, or to give one side victory over another in war. I sense that God winces when such prayers are given - and I have a feeling Jesus does too.

I don't think Jesus is talking about these kinds of things at all in today's passage, as if we could conduct the power of God through the words we choose or the rituals we perform. No, Jesus has little patience for such efforts; he is plainly more interested in conferring upon willing hearts an alternative approach to worldly ways, especially relational realities. Jesus encourages reconciliation, not punishment; Jesus counsels compassion, not judgment; Jesus wills us to gather across differences rather than practice strategic exclusions.

In other words, Jesus invites a trade of the "I" for the "we" -- and he doesn't stipulate when to use this strategy; in other words, this is the standard for faith - that we figure out this life together, peeling away human-created boundaries until we are able to see the foundational sacredness of the person at the core - no matter who stands before us.

One of my favorite "best practices" quotes which you've heard me state in sermons before (and, if you are on our staff, you've possibly gotten sick of me saying it!) is that I believe in "working to the WE" - in other words, moving from individual to team effort. I don't know how to approach effective ministry without an imperative towards team efforts in the leadership of our church for one simple reason - I KNOW MYSELF TOO WELL! I know you will find this hard to believe, but as your pastor, I don't know all the answers; in fact, I don't even know all the questions. I miss things all the time, I often get in God's way, I don't know the best way to do what I'm not sure how to do or when to do it. Are you ready for the bombshell? YOU DON'T HAVE A PERFECT PASTOR! What you have is a pastor who desperately needs the wisdom, correction, insight, ideas, forgiveness, patience, support, encouragement, and prayers of others - which means you! It is mutual, of course, that you need these things from me, and for which I am responsible and accountable to you. But the point remains as Jesus

emphasized here and so many other places in the Gospels - we need each other to make life work as God intended it to work.

This comes from Jesus himself, of course -- though he embodied the power and wisdom and omniscience of God, his first real step in the work of ministry was to call his team together, twelve disciples who were misfits and graceless beings who were amazingly dense at times, yet essential to the processes of Jesus's revealing God to the world. It was as if God was just too big for one individual to express, even if that individual were God's son. God's revelation needed fuller representation.

That's where we come in, much like the disciples and any who have hopes of searching and finding Jesus in this life. "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name...." - he's speaking about us, you and I in the First United Methodist Church. He's speaking about all of those like us who are pursuing God's will by following Jesus. He's speaking to us as we find ourselves immersed in a world of contradicting messages valuing the individual above anything, a world where the highest ideal is getting to do what we each want to do freely, fully, and without interference from anyone, especially God. That is a recipe for disaster, for if the highest ideal is self-satisfaction, we must leave Jesus behind - and in doing so, we leave God behind as well. How many are the self-possessed persons on this planet who, though they might gain the world, have lost sight of life's depth and meaning, and find themselves surrounded by people yet feeling profoundly alone. Many are the testimonies of the rich and famous dying in isolation and despair, sometimes hastening their demise by self-destructive behaviors and often with a commentary of feeling alone in their demise.....as if self-pursuits left them empty.

God promotes the opposite approach to life. Do it together. Make your togetherness extreme; remove boundaries; work reconciliation; love enemies; embrace the stranger; love whom the world finds unlovable. Do not stop until all are reached; do not stop until all are loved; in other words, do not stop.

This may be hard to understand let alone accepts especially as Americans who cherish the concept of individuality as the core value of freedom, but it is a truth that lies at the center of our faith: As soon as we claim we belong to Jesus, we give up the solitary life; and we enter into the hard work of community where all are loved and needed. But we also enter into the world God already inhabits in the diversity of creation. Trying to see oneself by looking only at oneself carries the irony of missing much of oneself; trying to see oneself through the eyes of another doubles the accuracy of our self-perception; and adding God into the mix

exponentially increases our self-perception in ways the world can never do. It is as we learn to see the value of others that we understand the value of ourselves; and it is as we understand the value God places upon us all that we realize how essential others are to our own lives.

I end with something I've said many times, but I think it's at the heart of Jesus's message to us today.

There are two kinds of people in the world. When entering a room full of people, the first kind of person says "Well, here I am!"; the second kind of person says "Ah, there you are!" Jesus's counsel is clear - be the second kind.