

The 14th Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: September 10, 2017

Proper 18: Matthew 18: 15-20

Where Two or Three Gathered In My Name; I Am Among Them.

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Announcing itself with shrieking winds clocked at 130-knots, Hurricane Harvey slammed into the Gulf Coast, dumping more than 50 inches of rain over a 5 day period, submerging entire neighborhoods up to the roof. In the days before expected landfall, the Governor of Texas warned that the monster system would be “a very major disaster,” and the forecasts drew fearful comparisons to Hurricane Katrina, one of the deadliest ever to strike the United States. In the aftermath, Harvey is being called a disaster of biblical proportions. It dropped an astounding 25 trillion gallons of water in Texas. Fifty people have died and officials believe the death toll will rise. Thousands of people were displaced, seeing their homes and businesses completely

destroyed. The city of Houston and its surrounding suburbs received the brunt of the damage, and many expect it to be the most expensive natural disaster in US history. With Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Jose on the way, it is, at times like these, that we need to take heart and remember these words: *"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am among them."* When storms destroy our communities causing us to come together to help and work alongside one another: Jesus is with us. When we come together in pain: Jesus is with us. When a family bows their heads to give thanks at the dinner table, Jesus is there. When we stand in prayer beside the hospital bed of someone who is suffering and dying, believe me when I say, Jesus is there. You want to find Jesus? This is where you will find Him. Matthew's gospel gives us the answer straight up. It is Jesus promise to us: *"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am among them."* You will find Jesus when you come to Holy Trinity Church for the express purpose of hearing God's word. You will find Jesus when you come to Holy Trinity Church to worship and receive God in Holy Communion. You will find Jesus when you come to Holy Trinity Church to lift up your hearts in prayers of petitions begging God to heal the sick, comfort the dying and mending the broken hearted, in this place you will truly find Jesus, the Son of God in the midst of us, guaranteed!

That is the power of corporate prayer. It is important that we pray

individually, but it is even more important when we come together as a church to pray. We are a community. We are a church family and better yet, we are all connected to one another and to Almighty God by the divine spark we call our souls, our Holy Spirit.

I want to ask you a simple but very profound question, “Do you think that most Christians know what they’ve got?” Christians have both a Divine Savior and a congregation. Of course, we are grateful to have a Savior. However, it is impossible to overstate the importance of the congregation as well. We are not simply an assembly of individuals. We are the body of Jesus Christ on the earth. Our divine spirit connects us directly to Jesus who has called us into this sacred community. Jesus has called us to be members of His own family. Jesus calls us to be His image and likeness to the world and to one another. When the world sees us, the world should see the face of Jesus, the world should hear the voice of Jesus and the world should be drawn into the everlasting love of Jesus.

In this reading from Matthew’s Gospel today, we see that in the family of Christ we are responsible for one another. “If your brother or sister sins,” says Jesus, “go and point out their fault, just between the two of you.” This is a very difficult teaching. It is one that is often overlooked because many of us

shy away from confrontation of any kind. “Live and let live” is our motto.

And yet, confronting a fellow believer who is involved in a sin of any kind can be the most loving thing, the most Christ-like thing, we can do. In today’s gospel, Jesus is calling us as a community to hold one another accountable for our behavior. Christ is not calling us to pass judgment on one another, but to care enough to intervene if we see a friend is about to make a serious mistake.

A Christian author tells a story of praying for a friend whom she knew who had become involved in an extra-marital affair. One Sunday she happened to be sitting behind her friend in church. During the prelude, she leaned forward and put her hands lovingly on her friend’s shoulders and whispered, “Be careful that you don’t throw away something very beautiful. I’m praying for you.” The friend involved in the affair began weeping softly and almost immediately broke off the illicit relationship. Years later, the author attended a high school graduation. One of the young people graduating was the son of the woman who had been having the affair. This woman came up to the author and gave her a big hug. “You were so right,” she said with gratitude. “If you had not spoken those words to me that day, I would have thrown away nearly everything that was important to me. Thank you so much.” Can you see what a loving act that was? Can you see the tragedies this act possibly prevented? “If your brother or sister sins go and point out their fault,” said

Jesus, “just between the two of you.” Don’t make a big deal of it. Do it in a loving manner and always keep the conversation between the two of you forever confidential. But friends do not let friends ruin their lives.

My sisters and brothers, this is such an important passage of scripture. And yet, quite honestly, this would be very difficult for most of us to do. It requires a great deal of love. It also requires a great deal of courage. Too often we confuse love with permissiveness. It is not love to fail to dissuade another believer from sin.

The second thing we need to see is the power of a praying church. Jesus says, “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.” What an amazing statement. I will be the first to admit that I do not fully understand what Christ is saying to us with these words, but I do know there is much power when Christian people work together, pray together, laugh together and shed tears together. That has always been the strength of the church.

In early January 2018, Holy Trinity Church will begin the second phase of the restoration of the sanctuary. The church will be deconsecrated. The pews, kneelers and book racks will be removed from the church and refurbished. The carpeting will be removed. The floors will be sanded and stained. We will

worship in the parish hall for about 4-6 weeks. The reserve sacrament will be moved out of the church and locked in my office. For this project to succeed we need your financial donations, we need your time and, we especially need your labor. We will have Saturday working parties to do things such as removing the old carpet, loosening the screws that hold the pews to the floor and many other chores. I know that all of you have this power within you to work together, to laugh together and maybe shed a tear or two the next morning when you awaken with a sore back.

So, I ask you. Does it really matter if modern day Christians look out for one another? I say unequivocally, “YES.” We have what the world desperately needs and cannot supply. We have a Savior and we have Christian love and we are rich in fellowship. We can love one another and love those beyond our walls and that is our job. Christ calls us to be a loving and caring community. To reach out arms of sympathy and support to those who are in distress. To rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep. We can easily forget those with whom we have laughed, but we can never forget those with whom we have cried. We are responsible for one another.

There is a lot of power in a church that is united in prayer and service to one another. I know there is power in Holy Trinity Church. There is, of course, a

reason for that. The body of Christ is much more than the sum of its individual parts, for where two or three gather in Christ's name, Jesus is there with them. That is the crowning conclusion to our gospel reading today. You see, faith is not so much believing this thing or that thing about God as it is hearing that small voice deep down inside that calls to us saying, 'Come unto Me.' We hear the voice and then we start to move out without really knowing what to believe either about the voice or about ourselves. And yet we go. Faith at this point is standing in the darkness, and a hand is there reaching out, and we reach out and we take it. We take the hand of God and then we reach out in the darkness and we take hold the hand of our neighbor. That is who we are and that is what we are all about.

A man knew his time was near. So he sent word to his family to come home so he could see them all one last time. As soon as they arrived, the father called them into his room. He had been bed ridden for weeks. When they entered and formed a circle around his bed so he could see everyone, he then told them to go outside and bring back a nice-size stick. Now this sounded strange, but seeing the shape their father was in, they each went out in the yard and brought back a big stick. After everyone got their stick they all gathered around the old man's bed. He told them to start breaking the sticks one by one. He told to pass the sticks around in one stack and bring them to him.

When they had done this he pulled out some fishing line and told them to tie the bundle tightly at each end. Then he told his children to try and break the sticks. One by one they all tried to break the bundle of sticks but could not do it. The father responded by saying, “I just want you to know if you stick together it will be harder to break you.” My sisters and brothers, what is true of a family is true of a church. The closer we are to Christ and the closer we are to each other, the harder it will be to break us apart and the greater will be our impact upon the world. Do you know what you got here at Holy Trinity Church? Blessed be the name of the Lord who ties and binds our hearts in Christian love forever. AMEN.