

## ***“The Real Presence of Christ” – Matthew 18:15-20***

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Now, this may come as a surprise to some of you, but sometimes there is conflict in the church. Most churches have a constitution and by-laws that govern the functioning of the congregation. They are constructed, voted on, and presumably implemented to help leaders and members have structure, make decisions, govern, and handle conflict if it arises. Our Gospel reading today from Matthew 18 is used often to help congregations deal with adverse behavior and conflict in the life of the church. Wherever people gather together, it is a known fact that there will be problems and conflict. Some have translated Matt. 18:20 to say, “Wherever two or three are gathered, a fight will likely ensue.”

Listen to what our church constitution says regarding church discipline in Article XI: “Church discipline will always be carried out by the Senior Pastor and Commission of Elders in reverence for Christ and His church, and with compassion for the erring member, yearning for the eternal welfare of his/her soul. Such discipline will follow the guidelines given by our Lord in Matthew 18, always with the goal of regaining the one who is separating himself/herself from the church through an impenitent life. Should excommunication become necessary, such action may only be carried out by the Vision Assembly.”

What’s missing from that statement and many other church constitutions is what Jesus says in 18:20. Jesus states that “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” The real presence of Christ makes all the difference in the world when it comes to healthy decision-making, reconciliation, and harmony in the church. With Christ and His love at the center of our conversations, the results can be amazing so that all involved can move forward.

Since next Sunday is Rally Day, I did not want to start a new series today so I am using the readings assigned for today, The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost. Now do I think that it’s just a coincidence that we have this section from Matthew 18 where Jesus talks about how we are deal with one another in the church, on the same weekend that we are holding our first monthly “family Meeting” here at Mount Olive? I think not. Now, do I think we are church in conflict – NO! But, as we face this time of economic challenge here, we certainly want to invite and depend on the very presence of Christ in our meeting and all that we say and do.

Matthew 18:15-20 begins with an all too likely hypothetical situation: “If your brother sins against you.....,” which is followed by a second hypothetical, “If your brother refuses to listen...” which bears the not-so-hypothetical truth to all of us who have brothers or sisters. Sooner or later; brothers and/or sisters are going to fight and sin against one another.

But it should also be noted that the community is in play, the word “church” does follow in verse 17, and the tensions and trials which arise from the sins we commit against one another do have an impact not just on individual relationships, but on the community as a whole. At stake in this issue of sin, confrontation, repentance and forgiveness is the presence of God and what it means for us.

The flow of the passage is important to make note of, as there is movement from the individual to the communal. Where there is sin, Jesus says, confront it directly, one-to-one, face-to-face. If this does not solve the problem, include someone else in the conversation, and if all else fails take it to the community as a whole. From individual confrontation to communal attention. At each point along the way sin has implications for everyone involved.

Back, now, to the real presence of Christ. Following his teaching on the progression of the confrontation of sin in an attempt to reconcile, Jesus teaches that any sinner so committed to his/her position that they will refuse to listen even to the church is to be treated like "a Gentile and a tax collector" (verse 17). It is ironic (and probably intentionally so) that this line follows the parable of the lost sheep and precedes the response to Peter's question about how often one has to forgive a brother who sins (repeatedly) against you.

Jesus says, essentially, that being a member of the church means you have a responsibility. If your sheep gets lost you don't look for an hour and call it quits. You get out there and find that sheep. If your brother sins against you seventy-seven times (another hypothetical certainty), that's how many times you forgive him.

Notice that Jesus follows this with talk about the power of agreement, saying that anything that is agreed upon by two on earth will be done for them by the Father in heaven. This is a promise. But notice as well that this is not where Jesus ends. Jesus says last, "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." There is no question of agreement at this point. Jesus is present, really present, where two or three are gathered in the His Divine Name, not just where two or three agree in Jesus' name, but where two or three are gathered; presumably this includes the two who cannot listen to each other about a matter of sin, and how to handle it. Even there, perhaps especially there, Christ Jesus is present.

The subject matter of this passage could not be more fitting for Christian communities in every age, place, and situation. One of the things that plagues most Christian communities (and other communities no doubt) is the inability to handle confrontation, disagreement and our mutual accountability when it comes to sin. We simply don't know how to live together, fight together, and stay together. And this is because we, all of us -- and not just our brother or sister -- are sinners.

Jesus offers a simple guide to help us handle our sin and its consequences here. But far more importantly Jesus promises us that he is present, that his presence is real for us, when we are gathered in his name -- both in agreement, and in sin. Within the context of the overarching narrative of Matthew, which is governed by the promised real presence of God, in the promise of a child named Emmanuel, God with Us (1:23) and in this God's parting assurance to us that he is with us always (28:20), this is the Good News for us who are members with one another of Christ's church.

Many question today, why they should go to church? Many ask of what value is the church for my faith life? Did you know that 40% of Christians don't belong to any church but profess, at the same time, to be Christians and believe in Jesus Christ? If so many professing Christians do not belong to a church, then the question needs to be asked, why join a church? Why go to church? Can't I be just as good of a Christian at home, saying my own devotions, doing my own good deeds, praying my own prayers, and watching church on TV in the comfort of my own living room? Why go to church?

We go to church because God commanded it in the 3rd commandment. Jesus says He fulfilled the law and if we are in Christ, then we are in the church. Beyond that, He gave to the church this authority of forgiving sins, which Luther called the Office of the Keys. It says clearly in our Gospel reading that the authority of Christ to forgive sins works through the church. Jesus says to the church in verse 18, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

We come to church because this is where Jesus is. This is where we come to hear of God's love which sent Jesus to earth and to the cross and to rise again to bring us forgiveness, life and salvation. This is where His forgiveness resides. We receive His presence and forgiveness when His Word is read, His Sacrament administered, and His absolution proclaimed.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: We celebrate a great promise in our text today. The promise is that we will not be alone as we seek to resolve conflict. We are told that "for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Peace in a congregation is not an easy task, and we need to be assured of Jesus' presence. Peace is not the absence of war, but the presence of love among us. This is not for the weak of heart, it is hard work. Yet, we are assured as we are intentional about dealing with conflict, not only are we restored to relationship, those around us see our love and see Jesus, we will also sense and receive Jesus' presence. In the precious name of Jesus. Amen.