

The Improbable Community

Matthew 18:15-20

“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. 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 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. 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.”

“**T**he Church just doesn’t get it,” my interlocutor was saying. “Here we are in the internet age. Everything has changed, including the nature of community.”

For several months this man had been trying to set up a meeting. He said he had a business proposition for me, and although I tried to shrug him off, he was insistent. It wasn’t urgent, he said, but it was important. We finally arranged a meeting in midtown Manhattan. He was an ordained Presbyterian minister, it turned out, and also an executive in a tech company with offices in Alberta and Colorado. He had been CEO of several start-up

companies, he said, and had raised hundreds of millions of dollars in venture capital.

As we talked, he became more and more animated. “Here, look at this, he said excitedly, pulling out his laptop computer. He deftly navigated to a website with a funny-sounding name. Think of any combination, he said, and I’ll bet we find some virtual community already established here on the internet.

I played along, and he was right. Who knew that there was a virtual community for left-handed, Wiccan, Kansas City Royals fans?

“The Church simply has got to get with the program,” he said.

As he talked, I looked out the window and down into Times Square. We were seated in the eighth-floor lobby of the Marriott Marquis. The LED lights of the billboards gyrated all around us, pulsing with their insistent messages: Buy this! Drink that! Do your banking here! Insure with us! Diet Coke is the best thing ever!

I began to think about the community of faith we are building here at Christ Church. It defies all logic. The notion that we can construct a community around liturgy and music other than hip-hop or that produced by one of those awful “worship teams” that are all the rage in the megachurches. And people sitting still for a sermon? As they say in the Bronx, fuggitaboutit. Even St. Paul acknowledged “the foolishness of preaching,” and that was back in the first century. Here in the twenty-first century, the idea of a sermon is hopelessly archaic.

As I looked out the window at the lights of Times Square, never had the distance between Manhattan and Christ Church in Middle Haddam seemed so great. Here we are, a country parish in central Connecticut, clinging to

the notion of a Christian community in the internet age. How hopelessly out of fashion we are.

The Church has got to get with the program, my interlocutor repeated. We have to find a way to make faith relevant to the twenty-first century. We have to foster community through the internet because that's where everything is happening these days.

I'm sure he has a point; there's more we as people of faith can do to make the gospel attractive, especially to a younger generation. But today's Gospel lesson suggests another model, one that has endured through the centuries: "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name," Jesus said, "I am there among them."

I suppose Jesus could have said, "Whenever a couple of you log on to my website, I'll be there." But he didn't. "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

That's a very different paradigm, I think. And it rests to some degree on the doctrine of the incarnation, the word become flesh. As Christians, we believe that God became incarnate – became human – in the form of Jesus. The Almighty could have sent a letter, I suppose, or an e-mail. But he chose instead to take bodily form in Jesus. The incarnation.

And so it is with us, the Church, which is often called the "body of Christ." What I find so striking in the Gospels is that Jesus so often demonstrates his own humanity. "Jesus wept," John tells us in the shortest verse in the Bible, and he wept again in the Garden of Gethsemane as he contemplated his mission to Golgotha. He grew tired from the crowds and had to slip away by himself for some rest. He enjoyed wine and a good meal, like the wedding feast in Cana. He recognized the physical needs of his followers by providing nourishment in the feeding of the five thousand. And even the Last Supper,

which provides the model for our Holy Eucharist, entailed eating and drinking.

So, in obedience to Jesus himself, we gather here each week as embodied human beings, and we interact with one another in all of our flawed humanity – our sadness and joys, in health and infirmity. We look one another in the eyes and shake hands when we exchange the peace. And we gather at the Lord’s Table for sustenance, both physical and spiritual.

Perhaps I lack imagination, but I’m not sure we could pull that off over the internet.

I’ve long suspected, in fact, that the best antidote to the televangelists is a good, solid sacramental theology. If you are a low-church Christian, and you believe that the real purpose of attending church is not to partake of the Lord’s Supper but simply to hear a good or an entertaining homily, then why not simply stay home and tune in to the televangelists? They’re accomplished preachers, after all, and probably better than you’ll find in your local parish.

But if you believe, on the other hand, that we as a community partake of the grace of Christ in the sacrament of his body and blood, that’s a different story. You can’t get that by watching television or surfing the internet.

“Where two or three are gathered in my name,” Jesus said, “I am there among them.”

So here we are as the gathered Church, located at Christ Church in Middle Haddam. We’re an improbable community, especially in the twenty-first century. We stand apart from the cult of entertainment that has permeated so many churches. We find comfort in venerable hymns and stately liturgy. We come to the Lord’s Table as equals. And even the sermon, despite “the foolishness of preaching,” connects once in a while.

It's a throwback, no question about it, these aspirations about a community of faith. It's unfashionable and countercultural. It offends contemporary sensibilities about efficiency and even the nature of community, especially in an internet age.

But Jesus asks us to gather with other likeminded souls. "Where two or three are gathered in my name," Jesus said, "I am there among them."

I wouldn't be anywhere else.

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