

# *“The Welcome of God”*

*Matthew 18:6-20*

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From the Pulpit

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*Prayer for Illumination: Immanent God, you promised that where two or three are gathered in your name, you are present. Here we are, gathered, well more than three. Open our eyes to your nearness and our ears to your word. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

Authentic community is hard to come by. I have had the pleasure of being a participant in a young clergy Facebook community for the last few years. It is a wealth of knowledge. The creative ideas and great resources sustain me in ministry and benefit the churches I serve. I'd call it an honest and authentic community of leaders of the church. It's a cyber community, so you don't have to worry about people not putting their laundry away or dishes piling up in the sink after dinner, but it's a community nonetheless.

This week the administrator for group asked me to remove myself from the community. It wasn't just me. They politely encouraged all of us who have "aged out" of the group to remove our names. I balked for a minute. Namely, I am doing some anticipatory grieving over moving on from the group and going back out on my own. (I am hopeful that I'll find the "not-so-young anymore but far enough from retirement"

group to join and call my own.) To me they're overemphasizing rule of enforcement over longer term relationships. Regardless, I will remove myself and follow the rule. Authentic community can be hard to come by, and fleeting.

Community isn't easy. After all, community is one of those feel-good words that draws us into idealism. It's like a version of the TV-sitcom *Cheers*, a place where you are accepted for you are, where you're never lonely, and where, of course, everybody knows your name. But the reality is that community is made up of people! And people, many people can be difficult, challenging, selfish, and unreliable.

The Gospel of Matthew has a uniquely sharp concern about human community. The first Gospel focuses on how difficult life together can be and how important it is. In our passage this morning, the author offers the most specific counsel Jesus ever gives out about how to deal with conflicts in the community. In five verses, he suggests three steps to conflict resolution.

First step: if someone offends you, confront them in private and tell them what the problem is. If that doesn't work, move to step two. Try an intervention--Go to the offender and bring a few witnesses in tow and try to solve the problem again. If

that doesn't work-move to step three. If the person still doesn't come around, cut them off and kick them out. It seems harsh but some Christian communities read this passage literally this way and it becomes the rule of discipline. Jesus says, "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector."

At first glance, step three sounds downright draconian. But it's actually not what you think. Who were those Gentiles? Non-Jews of course, all those uncircumcised Greeks and Romans whom Jews had traditionally avoided. The deep concern in this passage and in so many other places in the Matthew's Gospel is for community—honest to goodness Christian community. Gentiles-were now in; tax collectors-in as well. Matthew was himself a tax collector. He's in as well.

The Gospel is often so subtle. Jesus is clever and calculated in his messaging, "you are saying that you would like to shun them. You'd like to treat them like you once treated Gentiles and tax collectors, but now even the Gentiles and tax collectors are in."

The edgy implication for us is obvious. We may want to wash our hands of difficult relatives. We may want to dodge impossible people at coffee hour. We may have every right to give someone at work the cold shoulder. But Jesus' subversive point is that nobody-not Gentiles, not tax collectors, not

difficult relatives, not impossible church members, not ‘that guy’ at work, nobody is beyond the long arms of God’s inclusion. The broad welcome of God is for everyone. Every single one.

It’s interesting that the bookends of our passage reinforce the broad welcome of God. Preceding our text, Jesus reminds the disciples that God takes delight in the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine entrusted to his care, all the while going to search for his one lost sheep. On the other side of our text are two verses in which Jesus reminds Peter how to forgive. Peter asks, “How many times should I forgive? As many as seven times? Jesus responds, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.” These are reminders of God’s radical and abundant welcome and grace/commitment to forgiveness.

What if the point Jesus is making is less about having a code of conduct to follow and more about regaining a brother or sister? Maybe this is about being clear about parameters that lead to a healthy community and how to be in relationship together. What if Matthew’s major concern isn’t settling disputes but creating an environment where Christ’s presence continues to bring forgiveness, healing and joy?<sup>1</sup> The major

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/09/pentecost-14-a-christian-community/>

concern is about creating an environment where Christ's presence continues to bring forgiveness, healing and joy!

Authentic community is hard to come by. It's work. But it's worth it. Someone once said, "Because when you find it, it's like discovering a little bit of heaven on earth. It's like experiencing the reality of God's communal fellowship and existence in your midst." And, as Jesus promises, when you gather in this way---with honesty and integrity, even when it's hard---amazing things can happen because Jesus is with you, right there, in your very midst, forming and being formed by your communal sharing.<sup>2</sup>

Two things are true of community—not just church, but family, friendships, committees, work colleagues and Bible study groups, even that little community of two called "marriage." The first truth is that it's precious.

Life together is essential to our very humanity. Our world tends to imagine personhood in isolation. A person, we think, is merely the sum of individual ideas, passions, strengths, and weaknesses. We see personhood in isolation, as a solitary reality. But the truth is that our personhood is shaped in relationship to other persons. These relationships, these communities are not something added to a fundamentally

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<sup>2</sup> David Lose, August 28, 2011. <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1601>

private self, a mere option to life. Rather, relationship—family, friendship, and church actually makes us ourselves. In other words, I need all those in order to be myself.

If the first truth is that life together actually makes us who we are, that community makes us human, the second truth is that such life together can be a challenge. There are no perfect spouses, no perfect children, no perfect in-laws, no perfect committee members, not perfect colleagues or friends, no perfect classroom. Life in family, life in church, life in work, life in any community is our sweetest joy, but it's also our sorest test. The only thing harder than getting along with other people is getting along without them.

One of my mentors spent a week at the largest Benedictine monastery in the world, St. John's Abbey in central Minnesota. It's a community of three hundred (300) monks who eat, work, study and pray together. The Benedictines have been doing this quite successfully for more than fifteen hundred years. He shared this reflection, which I'll never forget. He says this,

*Monks, I have come to understand, are as mortal as you and me. There are crabby monks, depressed monks, scholarly monks,*

*thoughtful monks, and superficial monks. Monks in therapy and monks on Prozac.*<sup>3</sup>

Until that experience, my guess is he thought all monks around the world woke up just plain happy!

Writer Kathleen Norris published a book about these monks years ago titled *The Cloister Walk*. It's a rich collection of meditations about the life and faith of these very Benedictine monks of St. John's Abbey. In the book, she notes that one of the problems of life in a monastery is that every monk had a mother who fixed fried potatoes in a different way.

Two things are true for sure: Life together is fragile. And life together is precious.

As life together was fragile and precious for the people in Jesus' time, it is just as fragile and precious for us. We as a community of faith at First Church have figured out how to be in life together, in this ministry for 165 years. And we continue to figure out, by the grace of God, how to be a community of faith now and for generations to come. There has been turmoil and hardship. There's challenge and resistance. There's whining and celebration. And there is laughter and love. There is visioning and dreaming. Altogether, as you can imagine,

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<sup>3</sup> Michael L. Lindvall, The Brick Presbyterian Church, New York. Wednesday discussion after my own visit to a monastery in upstate New York. His reflections are quite funny. A sermon I heard from him helped me frame this sermon this morning.

we've seen our share of fragile and we've seen our share of precious.

So that's why we are here. To come together to be the Church: to experience the holy in prayer, music and worship, to embrace those who struggle, to encourage those who are down, to stand with those who are disenfranchised, to connect those who are lonely to the warm welcome of God.

That warm welcome of God is not out of reach---it never is. It is often clouded by our own earthly, human failings that keep us isolated and engaged in work that forgets to keep God at the center.

The Welcome of God is expansive. It's part of the Christian enterprise---of welcoming the stranger and loving your neighbor as yourself. It's the core of why faith communities gather to witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ and how they extravagantly welcome and how they change lives.

Today, we have some words to guide us as to how to be the church. The list is not exhaustive but I think it's a pretty good start. There are two huge banners on our lawn to the south and to the north of where we are right now. (11:00 these words hang in our sanctuary this morning). People along Broad Street and Gay and 9<sup>th</sup> have been stopping to think about these words, occasionally take a picture with them. There is

something in these words that uplifts the community and doesn't deplete it or manipulate it nor anyone else in it.

I invite you to take a look on your way out into the world today.

Be the church.

Protect the environment.

Care for the poor.

Forgive often.

Reject Racism.

Fight for the powerless.

Share earthly and spiritual resources.

Embrace Diversity.

Love God.

Enjoy this life.

Maybe one statement resonates with you? Which one? What phrase resonates with your neighbor? Which ones will guide us as our new program year begins? Maybe we'll just begin with Welcome in the name of Jesus Christ! Welcome to this sacred

space as we together try to figure out how to be the church in this ever changing, every crazy world.

The Welcome of God in this community of faith is all around us. Jesus promises us this-when you gather in a way that leads with honesty and integrity, even when it's hard, amazing things can happen with Jesus right here among us and reminding us of what kind of community is God calling us to be!

May it be so. Amen.

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