

St. Andrew's UMC
September 7th, 2008
Matthew 18: 15-20

“Where Two Or Three Gathered In My Name”

There was a young woman in one of the smaller churches I served. I will call her Audrey. She married a man who was about 30 years older. Audrey described the marriage as a loveless one. The man never attended the church. When I visited Audrey, he never said hello, and stayed out of the way.

Audrey one day asked for a healing prayer service. She had some illness that bothered her, and she would like a prayer meeting. Three of us, I and two other ladies, went to visit her. She said she would ask her husband to leave the door unlocked, because she could not get out of the bed. As I was getting out of the car, I happened to look up. There was a face behind a second story window that quickly disappeared. I thought it was odd, because the face looked much like Audrey's. Well, maybe that was someone who was helping her.

When we walked up to her room, she was in bed alone. I was wondering, who else was in the house. I was bothered with this seeming innocuous inconsistency. Since the thought interfered with holding a prayer service, I tried to forget it, and got on with what we were there for.

Some time after Audrey had recovered, she asked me to come with her and help her in her ministry. Oh, I did not know you had a ministry going. What is it? She had been visiting a local nursing home, and minister to the residents. She used to work at a nursing home before she quit working, due to a disability—so she knows what it is like to be a shut-in, she said. I thought it was a good thing that she did, so I agreed to go with her. I was not sure exactly what she meant by “ministry” so I asked her. She did not elaborate, but said that she would like me to help her.

When I went to pick her up, she was dressed smartly in black, and was carrying a large bag. When we arrived at the nursing home, she went to a room where there was a gathering crowd of people in wheelchairs. Then Audrey began to set up for the holy communion

out of the bag. I was wondering why she did not tell me it was the holy communion that we were doing. Then Audrey introduced herself and me, and asked me to help her in the service. She then proceeded to preside and celebrate the holy communion.

I was surprised by a few aspects: that she would not tell me what she intended to do, that she would conduct a sacrament without authority, that she would make her pastor assist holy communion, and that she would represent our church without any credential.

I was bothered with the whole thing. She had presented herself as the ministry outreach from our church, and allowed herself to be passed off as a minister. Then the small details of past inconsistencies I have noted over the period began to make sense. I had to share the experience with SPRC. It could have been made into a bigger deal, but we didn't. We just let it go.

When we think about it, at the time the Gospel of Matthew was written, the Christians met at house churches. They did not have large buildings such as synagogues or temples, specifically dedicated to the religious uses. This meant that each group of community was small in size. Perhaps, the churches of our size are closer to what the early churches looked like. Maybe congregations of our size were considered to be a "large" church in the early days.

The membership size of the early church communities might have been small, but they were not exempt from the problems within their congregations. The church leadership had to come up with a solution to deal with a disruptive member.

Wait a minute, you might say. "Is the pastor talking about the church leadership? Isn't it Jesus who said something about treating a member who has sinned like a Gentile and a tax collector?"

According to the text, it is clearly Jesus who is instructing the disciples. It is Jesus who is suggesting a progressive method of dealing with a trouble maker. First, in private. Secondly, in a company of two or three witnesses. Thirdly, in front of the whole church. Then, the person is treated as if he or she is a Gentile or a tax collector.

If we have been reading our Bible critically, we will note at least three problems with the account of Matthew. First, the word, church (ecclesia), had not yet been invented to designate the Christian faith community, until many years after Jesus died. There is no way that Jesus would have known the Greek word, much less had used it in his lifetime in the context that Christians did. It is like having Henry Ford Museum display the computer which Ford used to design his Model T.

Secondly, it is almost impossible, or at least unlikely, that Jesus had said "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." That phrase indicates that the speaker is assuming that his listeners observed the Hebrew custom of ritual cleanliness. That runs counter to what Jesus had been teaching:

¹⁰ And as he sat at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² But when he heard it, he said, "**Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.** ¹³ **Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners (Mt. 9)."**

Would Jesus self-contradict and negate the purpose of his mission, just to isolate some troublemakers in the ecclesia?

Thirdly, our text is immediately followed by Peter's question: "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" If what Jesus just said is any guidance, that would be 4 times too many. But Jesus said: "**I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.?"** Jesus just contradicted himself by 487. It is clear that, as a writer, Matthew had to reflect the reality of the church somehow, and included a solution to deal with a destructive force.

For some believers, this kind of critical reading does shake the foundation of their beliefs. If this is not what Jesus actually said, what

else is not the authentic saying of Jesus? How can we believe, then, the Bible as an authoritative source of our faith?

What we need to understand is this: the Christian faith is not as clear cut as we expect it to be, nor is it black and white in our understanding. We need to struggle, in order to understand what we believe. And no one can be so cocksure that what he or she believes is the truth beyond the shadow of any doubt. In other words, no one can claim he or she can perfectly understand the will of God, or perfectly practice what they believe as the truth.

That is precisely the point of contention among the believers: some contend that they are perfectly right, because they happened to believe it is right. The truth is that what we believe is not always right, and no one is perfect in belief or practice, besides God himself. Being faithful does not mean that we are perfect or righteous. Being faithful means that we are sinners who trust in the grace of God.

Am I faithful, because I am perfectly right? Or, am I perfectly right, because I am faithful? Since Jesus did not come to call the righteous but sinners, perhaps one should not spend too much time pretending to be righteous or perfect. Being faithful does not make one righteous, and being righteous does not make one faithful.

What we are seeing here is the problem that the early House Church was having. The faith community of Matthew was having problems with some members whose practice contradicted or disrupted the standard that was commonly held within the community. What we are seeing here is that the church leaders had to resort to certain artificial means, in order to contain the source of trouble—through the means that seemed to carry the authority of Jesus.

Matthew is believed to have been written between 70 AD and the end of the first century. Short time after Jesus' death, the problems surfaced within the community. They were serious enough to the health of the faith community. Its leaders felt it necessary to proscribe in writing how to deal with the destructive elements. They figured that they would not likely survive, by forgiving the offender seven times seventy, as Jesus said.

From this text, we should understand that the early Christians were as human as we are, and they had troubles of their own. They were not so different from us, and they resorted to the best way they could, in order to deal with the destructive forces within their own congregation.

Although Matthew intentionally slipped in what his community had decided to do, in order to deal with the destructive force, he nevertheless preserved the faith of the Matthean community:

18:18 “ 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.”

18:19 “ 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.”

18:20 “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Jesus promises that what we do on earth has a consequence in the heaven. If our hearts become one, our prayers will be granted. No matter how small our gathering may be, if we gather in Jesus' name, Jesus is also with us.

That is what matters in the Christian faith community—what we do matters to God, what we pray for is granted, and our gathering is attended by Jesus. That is the practical basis of the Christian faith.