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Sermon, Pentecost 14A, 2017

Christ the King Lutheran Church
Matthew 18:15-20

Good morning, and happy Rally Sunday! I love this day in the church, a day when we kick off another season of learning and growing in faith. It's such a gift to gather here in the company of all of you – together, we are the church. We are Christ the King. But we are also the church as the people of God gathered together, one body, for the sake of the world.

Rally Sunday gives us an opportunity to celebrate, to feel good about our “churchiness.” Here we are, at church on a Sunday morning, just as God intended (right?). But what is the church? Rally Sunday seems like a good day to review what it is we are even doing here. Why does this place matter?

Well, how about we first turn to the Bible, to the words of Jesus. What does Jesus have to say about the church? He has a few words for us today. And, if we focused only on the last part of what he says, that would be pretty great. “Where two or three are gathered in my name,” Jesus says, “I am there among you.” So let's begin by affirming that Jesus truly is here, among us, now. This is good news!

So OK then, church is a place where we get together because Jesus promises to be here. Simple enough, right? I wish this were the only thing Jesus said today about the church. That would have been pretty great.

Unfortunately, it is not the only thing Jesus says to us about the church. In fact, the gist of the gospel message today is, “If a member of the church sins against you, here's how you should handle it...” Hmm.

And I wish I could tell you that there were plenty of other really lovely things Jesus says in the Bible about the church to balance this one out. But if we look at what Jesus says about the church in all of scripture, we

would notice that Jesus doesn't even say the *word* church (*ekklesia*) until sixteen chapters into the gospel of Matthew. And today, we're only in chapter eighteen of Matthew. No sooner has Jesus invented the church than he's laying out a strategy for conflict resolution. (After our reading for today, Jesus does not mention the church again!)

So it seems as though Jesus guarantees that two things will be true about the church: First, Jesus will always be here among us. And second, we will disappoint each other. We will let each other down. We may even sin against one other.

Not exactly the most rousing of gospel readings for Rally Sunday, is it?

So what happens between Jesus first promising us the church back in chapter 16, and then Jesus giving us a system of conflict resolution a few verses later? Well, the disciples – the first church members, if you want to think of them that way – they make four big mistakes. Four different stories happen between Matthew 16 and our reading for today, and I wonder whether we recognize ourselves in any of them.

In story #1, no sooner has Jesus established the church on the rock of Peter's confession than Jesus begins talking about how he must suffer and die on the cross. "God forbid it, Lord!" Peter says, "this must never happen to you," at which time Jesus rebukes Peter, calling him Satan! In the first story, the church makes the mistake of denying suffering, of avoiding even talking about suffering altogether.

Story #2. Jesus takes Peter up a mountain where he meets up with visions of the ancient Jewish prophets, Moses and Elijah, and they all become dazzling white. Peter says, "Lord, let's stay on top this dazzling mountain forever – I will build us tents!" And Peter is rebuked a second time. In the second story, the church rejects the future that God is calling it to. It wants to remain on the dazzling white mountaintop rather than venturing into the places it is called to go.

Story #3. A man brings his son to the disciples for healing, and they throw up their hands and tell him that they can't help him. And, a third time, Jesus rebukes them saying, "You of little faith," and he cures the boy immediately. In this third story, we see the church refusing to help, to serve, or to heal the sick and the poor because they lack faith. They fail to believe that together they are capable of doing something prophetic and transformational in the name of Jesus.

And finally, Story #4. The disciples, after all of this failure and blundering, well they begin having an argument in front of Jesus about which one of them is the greatest! Jesus picks up a child from the crowd, sits her on his lap, and says, "this child is the greatest; if you want to know the kingdom of God, be like her, listen to her." In the fourth story, we see the church rejecting its children, refusing to pay attention to the smallest voices, and instead only fighting amongst itself about who is the greatest and most privileged member.

In short, my friends, from the very moment that Jesus commands that we start a church, we've been messing the whole thing up! We have failed in being the people God wants us to be. Why do we mess up?

Because we are a people obsessed with keeping points, keeping score. We want to be better than our neighbors. We want easy answers. We don't want to confront the suffering of others. We don't want to confront our own suffering. We fear the future. We don't listen to the voice of the child, the outsider, the poor. Some days, it is hard to have faith.

Let me say that all again, but a little differently: I am a person that is obsessed with keeping points, keeping score. I want easy answers. I don't want to confront the suffering of others, or my own. I fear the future. I don't listen to the voice of the child, the outsider, the poor. Some days, it is hard to have faith.

Which of those statements would you make about yourself? Can you relate to the very first churchgoers?

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

Listen now, to the good news of Christ, the good news of the church. This – our being together – has never been about us or about how great we are. As we see in scripture, the church has *never* been a place filled with perfect people who have all the answers all of the time.

In fact, I think *this* is the very reason why Jesus commands that we be together. Not because we are perfect but because we *need* one another if we’re ever going to be able to have faith. Jesus shows up, after all, when we gather *together*.

Jesus came to live among us, to show us the way, to die, and to rise to eternal life in order that we would be free to live according to this love – a love that has conquered all of our fears, all of our failures, all of our mistakes, all of our doubts, all of our pain. God has said to us – to *this* group of outsiders and misfits and dreamers – that we are beloved, that nothing can separate us from God, that the score is already settled.

Do you get this? There is no need to keep score! There is no need to prove we are right or wrong when it comes to this body. We are all already justified by the grace of God. This is why Jesus takes the time to teach us how to resolve conflicts – the gist of it is, “figure it out!” Because what matters most is that you are together, that your arguing with one another does not overshadow the knowledge of your belovedness.

So what then, church, do we do? If it’s all been done for us already, what does a body like ours do? Why are we here? One of my favorite fiction writers, Flannery O’Connor, writes in one of her stories: “You will know the truth and the truth will make you odd.”

When we let go of the need to score points, the need to be right, the need to be in control, we start doing odd things. The truth of our freedom in Christ makes us very odd indeed. And the church is really at its most prophetic and faithful when it is at its oddest. So what do we do?

Well, rather than scorekeeping,

We turn the other cheek.

We feed the hungry.

We wash feet.

We pray for our enemies.

We eat morsels of bread and drink sips of wine and experience forgiveness and love there.

Odd things:

We respond to disasters, as Lutheran Disaster Response has been on the ground responding the Hurricane Harvey, and to flooding all along the Gulf Coast.

We welcome the stranger.

We light candles in the dark and pray for hope in the face of hatred and division.

We sprinkle people with water – as we will Marlo (in a few minutes) - and claim by faith that this sprinkling is somehow revealing to her and to us the wide, mysterious love and mercy of the God who created her.

Odd things:

Like choosing to gather as a people across differing cultures, generations, languages, backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, sexualities, gender identities, nationalities, and any other category that the powers of this world try to divide us across every other day of the week.

It is odd to recognize by faith that we are not free *from* each other, but that we are free *in* each other.

And here is the real truth, my brothers and sisters. All of us, odd that we are, we gather as a church on Sunday mornings in order that we might be God's people in the world the rest of the week. Following in the loving, self-giving way of Jesus, of the cross.

Because God does not want more churchgoers – God wants a church, people like you and like me who bear witness to the merciful, loving truth that we know in Jesus.

We are not perfect – and thanks be to God for that! Instead, we are children of God, made in the image of God, beloved beyond any telling of it. I said it before and I'll say it again – it is such a gift to be gathered in the company of each one of you this morning. We are the church, gathered together, for the sake of the world. How very odd and pleasant it is.

Amen.

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

What is the church?

Are some people better or more important than other people?

These people pray for you! (new school, new class, etc.)