



(This article is an abridged version of a sermon that Pastor Kimberly prepared for September 10, but it was too heavy on law without enough gospel, so she tabled it and did something else from the pulpit. It is a reworking of her reflections on Matthew 18:15-20.)

For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

Matthew 18:20

We all know that God forgives us, when we ask. Many Sundays throughout the year, we confess to God that we have sinned and then I, as your pastor, proclaim our sins are forgiven by the work of Jesus Christ. This is the cornerstone of Christianity. But something that we tend to forget is that, whereas God forgives unconditionally, other people do not. When we hurt other people or they hurt us, it takes work to reconcile or heal that relationship.

This is Jesus's teaching in our gospel reading for today. It's a template for reconciling people within a church community. If someone hurts you, you go and tell them. Hopefully, they will apologize. Quite often hurts are not intentional. Sometimes though, there isn't an apology or even an acknowledgement of hurt. So, Jesus says, the next step is to take others with you to witness what is said. The witnesses may help to facilitate a conversation between someone that was hurt and someone that did the hurting.

If even that doesn't illicit an appropriate response from the wrong-doer. Then the next step is to take it to the church. Only if that fails to lead to repentance, does Jesus then encourage treating them like a Gentile or a tax collector. What he means by that, is to treat them as someone outside of the church.

This isn't Jesus's path to excommunicate people. He doesn't want people to be treated as if they are outside the community. The proof is in his own actions. God becoming human to be with humans in community. Our God is one God, three Persons in community. For Jesus, community is everything. In fact, Jesus spent his time on earth trying to help humans understand what community in the realm of God looked like. He kept that going all the way to the cross and then resurrected and went right back to his community – even though they had really hurt him badly. Although we don't have Jesus with us in the flesh now, we do have the Holy Spirit connecting us to one another and to God.

I know that that is much easier said than done. No one needs another place to hear that they aren't enough. No one needs another person telling them to do more. It's shoved in our faces all the time. So, instead, I want to hear from you, what would help for you to be more engaged in this church community? Based on what I know from the bible, theologians, and experience, the easiest way to be connected to God and church is to show up – to be here with us in worship. Worship is the one thing that is meant for absolutely everyone of every age and ability. All the other things that church does are important, but they are each geared to specific groups of people. Sunday School in particular divides people up by age. Volunteer activities are based on people's specific callings to minister. All of those things are important, but as a supplement to worship – not a replacement for it.

So, what can we do to get more people in worship? Before you start to think up answers and start texting me, I want to clarify that I am *not* talking about catering to individual wants. We cannot add more worship times. We aren't in a position to hire a rock band to lead worship. And, while I have joked about handing out Snickers bars, that isn't really what I'm looking for either.

My real question is: what would make you feel like you belong here? What would make you feel more connected to God and to this congregation? Church can't compete with other entertainment sources. Church that is following Christ isn't going to make anyone rich. It might not help you get into a good college or find success in the work place. We aren't here for self-help or advancement. We are here to share in the gospel of Jesus Christ. So, what would make you feel like you are sharing in that?

Jesus has promised that he is present in our community. Communal prayers are powerful – especially for those people struggling to come up with the words on their own. Ministry is more successful with many hands each doing what they can do. The realm of God isn't about individual satisfaction. It is about people working together to care for the brokenness in the world. That is the gospel in action.