

**“You Can’t Have Church without This”**

A few years ago a friend of mine was talking about a children’s sermon he had given where he had told the children gathered in front that there was something all of them could see that if it wasn’t there, they couldn’t have church. He said bedlam ensued as children started guessing and naming everything in sight – some doing it all at once. One said it was the pastor – you couldn’t have church without the pastor; others pointed to the organ or the organist. They were pointing to the furniture, to the hymnals – one child said, as he pointed to the communion vessels and the candles and the altar book, “That stuff up there.” Finally my friend pulled out a mirror and held it up in front of the children and the whole assembly and tried to regain control by saying we can’t have church without all of you. He had begun to wonder if it was going to be possible that particular day to have church even with all of them there, but finally a semblance of order resumed and the service continued.

I suppose we could come to the same conclusion if we read only the last verse of our gospel lesson for today. Given the difficult words and strategies laid out by the rest of the lesson, focusing on the last verse in the text is no small temptation. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” We could conclude that you can’t have church without people, with at least two or three. You can’t have church without community. And that would not be heresy. If that were the point of a sermon, even this sermon this morning – we could do worse. But the verses from Matthew 18 have more to say about the nature of that community, about the nature of the church than the fact that you need bodies – at least two or three. The lesson is about something even more essential, more basic to what it is to have church, or perhaps more accurately put, what it means to BE church, and that is forgiveness and

reconciliation. You can't have church without people, and because people are as they are, you can't have church – you can't be church without forgiveness and reconciliation.

Scandals and what can sometimes be nasty fights within the church as a whole and even within individual congregations have no doubt made most of us, especially those of us who have been around for a long time less idealistic about the make up of the church, but there is something about us or in us – maybe a glimmer of eternal optimism – which makes it difficult for us to stop believing and saying that if people were genuinely Christian, if people truly lived what they believed, we could forget all this talk about forgiveness and reconciliation because we would never have need of it. Matthew 18:15-20 could effectively be clipped from the sacred pages of scripture because genuinely Christian women and men would never sin against a brother or sister. Yet we know that they, we do. Our expectations of one another are often unrealistic in this regard.

I want to tell you this morning, my friends that you can be and have the church without moral purity. You can have and be the church with all kinds of scandals and injuries and offenses. God has and God will continue to preserve the Church through all kinds of scandal and embarrassment and division. God has and God will continue to sustain the Church through all kinds of fighting from within and without. But you cannot have and you cannot be the Church without the forgiveness of sins. You cannot have and you cannot be the Church without the ministry of reconciliation. It is for that purpose that the Church exists. The distinguishing mark of the church of Jesus Christ has never been its moral integrity, or its indivisible unity, or even its unfailing love of the brothers and sisters, as good and as noble and within the will of God as those things may be. The distinguishing mark of the Church is the forgiveness of sins, the ministry of reconciliation, and we are the most the Church when we are a forgiven and a forgiving

community. You simply cannot have and be the Church without that. People are not Christian – Christ like - because they do not sin against one another. People are Christian because they dare to risk forgiving one another and being reconciled to one another.

It goes without saying that holding up forgiveness and reconciliation as the hallmarks of the Christian Church is becoming increasingly counter-cultural in our world. Finding fault, assigning blame, character assassination, highlighting and amplifying distinctions, making people pay, and digging up the past are all activities which seem to win out in our world over the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. A number of years ago every time you opened the newspaper it seemed that another TV evangelist the likes of Jim Baker or Jimmy Swaggert to name a couple of the more prominent ones was involved in a scandal of some sort. I remember an article in the Des Moines Register in which the reporter interviewed a number of clergy in central Iowa about what it all meant. Some ripped apart the individuals as being a bunch of hypocrites, money-grubbers, and crooks. They accused them of never really being Christian in the first place. Others attacked the media for creating superstars who could not live up to their billing. Still others were critical of those who, in their words, were gullible enough to be taken in by wolves in sheep's clothing. A different response, however, came from one of the pastors in our synod who wisely and simply said, "All this is a reminder that we all have warts, and that all stand in need of the grace of God." That insight is the foundation upon which the Church with a message and ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation is built.

I wish I could stand before you today and tell you that I am a pro at this. I desperately wish that I could stand in this pulpit give you story after story of how following the advise of Jesus when dealing with those who have sinned against me or

us or I against them has been easy to say nothing of it being successful. Forgiveness and reconciliation is hard work; it is risky. In his words to the disciples, Jesus holds out the possibility that overtures for reconciliation, attempts to make things right between people may meet resistance. The reasons for that range from our unwillingness to admit that we may have been wrong to our own desire and satisfaction at being able to carry a grudge. But the text also reminds me that in the face of all kinds of brokenness, in the midst of all kinds of disunity and among the people of God, we are given the opportunity to know the joy of being forgiven, which is at the heart of our relationship to Jesus Christ; and we are given the opportunity to know the joy of being forgiving, which is when we are the most like Jesus. Jesus even gives us some tools which can make that happen, skills and gifts like truth telling in confidence, the support of one or two wise confidantes, and even the collective wisdom and judgment of the whole body of Christ. Whether or not we follow to the letter the steps as outlined in these verses from Matthew chapter 18 is for me not the issue. The issue is that as church, we commit ourselves to forgiveness and reconciliation, that we be creative with the gifts and resources of wisdom and reason which reside in the fellow members of the body of Christ, and that we not simply take on the attitudes and methodology of the dominant culture where we can be lead to believe that the will of God is accomplished by finding fault, affixing blame, and delivering punishment. Our text for today makes it clear that God's will is done when forgiveness is sought and declared, when reconciliation is the accomplished goal. You can't have Church, you can't claim to be Church and hope and pray and work for anything less. When two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus with this work and mission of forgiveness and reconciliation in heart and mind, Jesus is there among them – and that is the Church at its best and in its fullest form. Amen.