

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 6, 2020

EZEKIEL 33:7-11 | PSALM 119:33-40 | ROMANS 13:8-14 | MATTHEW 18:15-20

Church websites are one of my minor obsessions. To paraphrase Tolstoy, good church websites are all alike, but bad church websites are all bad in their own unique ways. There are the ones that clearly have not been updated this side of the millennium. And there are the ones that are so slick they look like they belong to a pharmaceutical company. There are the ones that have a brick-by-brick history of how the church was built and a list of what was served at every coffee hour back to 1910. And there are the ones that contain no address, phone number, email, denominational affiliation, staff directory, or liturgy schedule.¹

What I find most interesting about church websites is how communities of faith choose to describe themselves and their reason for being. One very common way communities do that is via today's gospel reading. "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Just the other day, I came across a box of Advent's old brochures and, sure enough, that line was on the cover. I would guess that most communities invoke this line because they want to emphasize the importance of community and relationships. Jesus is present wherever two or three are gathered, and between the pastor and the organist we have at least two, so why don't you come join us.

This is fine and good, but it's a little funny when you see the line put back in its original context. Because it's not just about relationships or community. It's about conflict, disagreement, and the struggle for consensus. Not exactly the thing you would put on a brochure. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Because to appreciate today's gospel reading, we have to start with a fact that we kind of know in the back of our minds but don't really think about a lot. The texts we read from in worship every week assume a community of people.² We often imagine that the gospel writers wrote their books first, and then communities of people started gathering around them to learn about Jesus. But it was really the other way around. The assemblies came first. The authors took it for granted that there would be communities of people who gather around these texts to hear the story of Jesus. So they didn't just write to people who might be interested. They wrote for communities like us.

In Matthew's gospel, that assumption is explicit. The word "assembly" or *ekklesia* in the Greek is only used in Matthew's gospel. And the idea of the assembly was important enough to Matthew that Jesus gives this long speech about it. And it doesn't have advice about how to administer the sacraments or what to look for in stained stained glass or how to run an altar guild or which hymnal to use. It has wisdom about conflict.

In Matthew's community, the central conflict was about religious identity. Matthew was writing for a primarily Jewish group of believers, but at the time he was writing, the lines between these communities were shifting in very unpredictable ways. The temple, the heart of Jewish life, had just been destroyed. Questions of what it meant to be a faithful Jew and what was at the heart of Jewish life were very much up in the air. And the community of people who worshipped Jesus, the assembly, was becomingly increasingly Gentile. And those tensions didn't just exist outside the church, they were lived out within the conflicts of the community itself.

When we hear of conflict, we usually think it's a bad thing. But it's really not. If you are a community whose life is normed by tradition but also seeks to engage the world, you will be in a constant conflict over what becomes vital and what gets left out.³ Those are creative conflicts. When communities cease to have conflicts, it

¹ Skull and Bones Presbyterian

² Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Four Gospels on Sunday: The New Testament and the Reform of Christian Worship* (Fortress Press, 2011) has a good analysis of this idea.

³ This is sort of an interesting way to think about the development of orthodoxy in the early church. The creation of orthodoxy isn't so much about articulating pre-existing truths so much as linking the past traditions of the church to allow for the reception of new ideas. Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 24-25 has a nice discussion of how the concerns and ideas of those deemed heretics end up being adapted into what we would consider orthodoxy. Even new ideas

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doesn't mean that they've attained spiritual enlightenment. It usually means they've stopped engaging the world and turned in on themselves. The opposite of conflict isn't agreement so much as indifference.⁴

We had some conflict as a congregation last year while we were deciding whether to become a Reconciling in Christ congregation. It wasn't a huge conflict, but there were people who thought it was a bad idea for various reasons. But we handled it in a healthy way. Everyone had a chance to share their concerns, everyone got their questions answered, everyone had a chance to vote, and we moved in that direction. We had conflict, but it wasn't destructive. It allowed us to make progress, and it clarified some next steps for us to take.

The reason that conflict was healthy was because we remembered that we were gathered, to use Matthew's phrase, "in the name of Jesus." Being gathered in the name of Jesus means that we are not gathered under our own interest or agenda or power, but that God has brought us together. I'm here because I'm a disciple of Jesus who's been grafted into this community. And I recognize that you are, too. Being gathered in the name of Jesus doesn't mean we agree on everything, it doesn't mean that we see eye to eye on everything, it doesn't mean we come at everything from the same angle, it just means that we have the same center.

Conflict becomes dangerous when we forget that we are gathered in the name of Jesus and think that we are gathered under our own agendas, plans, and wishes. Our conflicts tend to become harmful when we act as if we are on our own to sort things out for ourselves, and if we don't get the outcome we want, the community will cease to exist. What makes conflict unhealthy is not how strongly we disagree with one another but a belief that we are the last thing holding the community together. The idea that we are indispensable, irreplaceable, and at the center.

And that's really what Matthew is trying to get at. What Matthew was trying to communicate is not simply a math problem that whenever you have two people together, Jesus happens to show up. It's not like Jesus needs a quorum before he can do anything.

No, Matthew was trying to convey something much more profound than that. That even when you feel like you are at a point of confusion, disorientation, and indecision, Jesus is still present within the life of the community. There's never a point where we are on our own and have to sustain the church by our own efforts and strength. Jesus is always at the center.

One of the last times we gathered for in-person worship, someone asked me a very perceptive question after worship. They asked why we use the word "assembly" so much. I typically say things like, "I invite the assembly to stand." Or, "I invite the assembly to come forward." And if you flip through the *ELW*'s mass settings, you'll see that it does the same thing. So, they asked, why don't we use "our members" or "the congregation" or "the audience" or "you guys?" And it's because "the assembly" reminds us that this community isn't something we create by our own striving. It's a gift that God gives us again and again and again. And it's not an event we put on as the welcoming hosts, as if we were welcoming others into our space, but a gathering where everyone present is a guest. That's what it means to gather "in the name of Jesus."

And this community of people gathered in the name of Jesus, all of us, is a sign to the world. That in a world of so much contempt and resentment, we can still be brought together. Christ is still here. At the center. Still calling this community into existence. Still calling us into relationship. Still calling us toward one another. Assembling the kingdom of God in our midst.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

that are rejected end up shaping the norms of the community in some way. The image of orthodoxy has less to do with defending and preserving than discerning priorities and articulating what the normative beliefs of the community are.

⁴ "Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict." Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (A&C Black, 2013).

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