

Matthew 18:15-20
September 10, 2017

“Jesus’ Promised Presence!”

[The video, “Connections” was shown after the Scripture Reading and before the Sermon.]

As that video suggested, we have many types of connections but the connection we have in the Body of Christ – the Church is a community with a special connection! In today’s Scripture Reading, Matthew combined several short teachings or statements he attributed to Jesus, which deal with the connection we have in the Church. This collection deals with three specific issues for the Community of Believers. Let’s take a few minutes to examine them.

The Reading began with the topic of complaints or conflicts between individual members of the Church. It reported Jesus’ instructions were about the way we should handle such disputes. In fact, many years ago, Round Grove United Church’s Boards of Trustees and Deacons came up with a policy, which follows very closely what Jesus taught. The purpose of such a policy is to make clear gossiping, spreading rumors, and attempting to gather allies against another member are not the way of Christ. Instead, we are to follow the process of first going quietly alone to the person with whom one has a complaint. If the situation can’t be resolved in that way, then one goes to myself, as Pastor, or to the President of the Congregation to request assistance in dealing with the matter. If that does not bring reconciliation, then the person is to go to the Board of Trustees, if it involves an employee of the congregation, or to the Board of Deacons, if involves non-employees of the church. If the appropriate board is not able to facilitate the resolution to the situation, then the Board can bring it to the Congregation. Indeed, Jesus’ instructions also concluded with bringing it to the Church. He told his audience in **verse 17**, ***“And if he will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church.”*** I suspect, Matthew went on to put into Jesus’ mouth his final words about treating the person, who refuses to listen to the church, like “a pagan or a tax collector.” I say that because Jesus welcomed everyone, even the pagans – non-Jews and the tax collectors.

Johnny Dean confessed how following Jesus’ instruction about dealing with a complaint ended in a very good result. He said, “Several years ago, a good friend and colleague in ministry came to visit me at the church I was serving in Memphis. After we exchanged greetings, he put his arm around my shoulders and said, ‘Johnny, you know I love you. That’s why I have to tell you this.’ And he proceeded to gently, lovingly scold me for the way I had been handling a particular situation in the church. And he was absolutely right. I knew that the way I had been dealing with that situation was not the right way to handle it. My motivation was good, but my actions were wrong. And after he left, I knew that here was a friend who would stand beside me in tough times, because he loved me enough to risk damaging our friendship by confronting me with my mistake.” Johnny Dean concluded, “Loving confrontation, which is what Jesus calls his followers to practice, is never easy. Many of us would prefer to just ignore it, or not name what it is, especially in the church. Out of some sense of false humility, we would rather just keep quiet about it. It’s just easier not to get involved. But no matter how painful it may be, sooner or later we must resolve our differences in a Christ-like manner.” (Johnny Dean, Gentiles ’R Us)

The second part of the Scripture dealt with how the Church orders itself. Because the phrases seem unusual or strange, what Jesus meant may not come through. He said in **verse 18**, ***“And so I tell all of you: what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.”*** Unfortunately, some throughout Church History have demanded everyone become carbon

copies and they have even sought to concentrate power in the hands of a few to enforce that. The result of those practices imposed demands on the lives and beliefs of the church members. However, there has also been examples of openness and tolerance among some churches. For example, the Johannine Community – those who were led by the Disciple, John, was much more diverse and welcoming of all types of people, instead of demanding everyone legalistically follow a specific and narrow path. It seems to me that Jesus’ instruction in our Reading about permitting in the Church and in Heaven goes well with the approach in the Johannine Community and the individual freedom and community covenant in the United Church of Christ. The debate over the most appropriate Church Order and Life is not merely arguing philosophy. Instead, we are called to follow Jesus’ example – his way of treating others. That is part of why I believe it was Matthew or his source, who put in Jesus’ mouth the comments about treating disaffected church members as pagans and tax collectors.

Back on Sunday, May 28th, of this year, we celebrated Heritage Sunday across the highway in the Original Sanctuary. The sermon was titled, “Resistance is NOT Futile!” In that message, I mentioned I am a Star Trek fan and discussed how the Borg Collective was an adversary of the Federation of Planets and Star Fleet in many of the episodes of several different Star Trek TV series and movies. The standard Borg message to other organizations and peoples was “Resistance is futile!” One of the Star Trek TV series was “Voyager”. In the later years of that series, one of the new characters of the Voyager crew was Seven of Nine, whom Captain Janeway had helped return to her humanity so she no longer was part of the Borg Collective. In a two episodes story, Seven was forced to return to the Borg to protect Voyager and her crew. The Borg Queen attempted to tempt or coerce Seven to willingly rejoin the Borg Collective to help them destroy or assimilate humanity. Seven was forced to participate in the Borg’s assimilation process of a planet full of people. After the assimilation was completed the Borg Queen and Seven had the following exchange:

The Borg Queen: “Congratulations.”

Seven: “Regarding?”

The Borg Queen: “Assimilation is complete.”

Seven: “300,000 individuals have been transformed into drones. Should they be congratulated as well?”

The Borg Queen: “They should be. They’ve left behind their trivial selfish lives and they been reborn with a greater purpose. We’ve delivered them from chaos into order.”

Seven: “Comforting words. Use them next time, instead of ‘Resistance is futile.’ You may elicit a few volunteers.”

The Borg Queen: “You cling to sarcasm because you are afraid to see the truth. Species 10026 is already adding to our perfection. You can feel their distinctiveness coursing through us – enhancing us. Stop resisting. Take pleasure in this.”

Seven: “I will not take pleasure in the destruction of a race.”

The Borg Queen: “Human sentiment – compassion – guilt – empathy – they are irrelevant.”

Seven: “Not to me.”

The Borg Queen: “Me, there is no me. There is only us – one mind.”

Seven: “My thoughts are my own.” (Star Trek: Voyager – S5:E16, “Dark Frontier”)

Let me submit the actions and views of the Borg Queen in that Voyager story were very similar to the those of the Pharisees and denominations and congregations, which reject everyone, who is not exactly like themselves. Jesus did not demand his disciples be carbon copies of a specific type of life and belief. Seven’s individuality and empathy for those, who were assimilated by the Borg, is much more akin to Jesus’ welcome and hospitality toward everyone – even the pagans, tax collectors, Samaritans, and the supposed “sinners”. We, as a local congregation of the Body of Christ – the Church, are to follow Jesus’

agape loving welcome and acceptance of all people. Let's remember, Jesus said in **John 6:37-39**, ***“Everyone whom my Father gives me will come to me. I will never turn away anyone who comes to me, because I have come down from heaven to do not my own will but the will of Him Who sent me. And it is the will of Him Who sent me that I should not lose any of all those He has given me, but that I should raise them all to life on the last day.”***

The final Church issue Jesus addressed in our Scripture was his presence with the Gathered Community – the Church. Jesus promised in **verse 20**, ***“For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them.”***

After talking about all the problems and worries caused by Hurricane Harvey and certainly others like Irma and future hurricanes, the sermon.com staff reports, “It is, at times like these, that we need to take heart and remember these words: ‘For where two or three come together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.’”

The sermons.com staff continue, “When we come together in pain: There He is with us. When we come together to pray. He is with us. When we come together in compassion to help. He is with us.” The staff asks, “Where do you find Jesus? That’s our question for the day.” They go on to point out, “In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus makes an incredible promise to us: ‘Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.’”

They conclude, “Think about that. When a married couple kneels together beside their bed in prayer, Jesus is there. When a family bows their heads to give thanks at the dinner table, He is there. When a pastor has a prayer beside a bed in a hospital with someone who is suffering, He is there. When storms destroy our communities and we Christians bind together, He is there. Want to know where to find Jesus?” (From “A Devastating Storm, an Incredible Promise” by the sermon.com staff)

Jesus told us where we will find him – it is when, even a few of us are gathered together in his name – it is then that he is with us! Being the Church is not limited to Worshipping in a mega church or a large church or a middle size church or even a small congregation. Yes, when, even two or more of us come together in Jesus’ name – he is with us and we are the Church!

Since Jesus promised he is present with us when we gather in his name, we can trust he was telling the truth! You and I – all of us are not alone when we come together in Jesus’ name! Jesus and the Holy Spirit will provide us insight, encouragement, comfort, and guidance – even as we face illness, death, suffering, and hardship. Let’s trust Jesus’ promised presence! Amen.