

“Our Life Together”

Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park

At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park on September 4, 2011

Texts: Exodus 1:1-14, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

What do you think happens when and where two or three are gathered together? Good for you if the answer is the verse in the Bible, Jesus’ words we read today, “*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*” How beautiful! Where two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name, there is church. God is there among them!

Let me share with you another truth about what happens where two or three are gathered together. Where two or three are gathered, whether in Jesus’ name or not, there are gossips, there are hurts, wrongs, mistrusts, divisions, and bickering. I cannot speak for all of you. But, I can say that that has been my experience so far, First United Methodist Church of Oak Park being the only exception! We do not have any of those here, right? You know, a lot of these ugly things happen not in the church per se, but rather in church parking lot. But we do not have a parking lot. So, I think it helps! We don’t have any place to gossip!

Well, Jesus may not have said this verbatim, but today’s gospel lesson seems to indicate that it may have been Jesus’ experience, too. “*If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you,*” he says (v. 15). Jesus instructs his disciples on how they are to behave in a community. Not only in today’s lesson, but in many other places in the Bible, especially in Matthew, we find Jesus giving such instructions. “*Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?*” he asked earlier, in chapter 7, verse 3. “*Do to others as you would have them do to you,*” he said, chapter 7, verse 12.

I don’t know about you, but as for me, I am greatly comforted to know that our Lord, Jesus himself, knew of the struggles of life in a community. Not only he knew, but also he had great care and deep concern about them. You see? The life of faith is not just about some abstract concepts or ephemeral feelings. The life of faith is not a life lived in lofty solitude. It is about our concrete everyday life lived here on earth, in a community, with all its pains, hurts, and struggles. And that is where Christ is to be found. Yes, Jesus is to be found, the Spirit is to be found, God is to be found, not only amid the beauty of the sanctuary, but also in our parking lots and around our kitchen tables, not only in “pure” and “holy” moments of our solitude, but also in messy and chaotic moments in our life together as a community!

So, what does Jesus want us to do when, and if, we find ourselves in one of those places? Let me read the first two verses of our lesson once again, using Eugene Peterson’s Message translation: “*If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you’ve made a friend. If he won’t listen, take one or two others along, so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again.*”

Did you hear? Jesus did not say, “*You will mediate and manage the differences among members by forming a ‘grievance committee’ or ‘complaint department’.*” He did not say, “*You will go talk to someone else, a third person, that he or she may take sides with you.*” He did not say, “*Go grab someone to relieve your feelings and diffuse your tension.*” Jesus said, “*Go and talk to the person who hurt you, directly, in person.*”

If you ever tried to talk to someone who had offended you and treated you poorly, you know how much courage you need to muster to be able to do so. I assume that even if you had the courage to do so, these conversations did not always turn out the way you had hoped. If we are being honest, brutally honest, often, it is not only because of one person’s fault, but because of the

assumptions and prejudices we all have. After all, we are all human beings. We all have our own lenses through which we see what happens around us. We see what we are able to see; we see what we are conditioned to see; we see what we are willing to see!

Do you want to hear a little story about how the lenses we wear shape, color, or blur our vision? Last month, there was flooding in my basement. It was sewer water back up. Of course, I informed our Trustees right away. They were concerned, especially about my damaged water heater and the sewer system. And they acted quickly to have my water heater checked and replaced.

However, as for me, when I realized that the water had been 10 inches deep and everything that was on floor or on the bottom shelves had been under water, the first thing I thought of was neither the water heater nor anything else. It was my son's Play Station 3! Those of you who have young children should understand what I mean. I could almost hear my youngest son yelling and screaming, which he did, when he later found out about his Play Station!

Yet, for another person, the handy man whom we had come in and check the water heater, it was a yet another story. While checking, he was rather quiet. But, as he was leaving, he said, very proudly, "*My tiles stood the flooding.*" Then, only then, I remembered that he was the one who had installed the new tiles in my basement. The tiles were not the reason for his visit this time. But for him, the tiles mattered! They were important!

You see? The situation we were facing was the same. Yet, what we were seeing in it was not exactly the same – for our Trustees, it was the water heater and the sewer system; for my son, it was his Play Station 3; for the handy man, it was his tiles; and, as for myself, I was concerned about how to communicate with those involved, including my son! Why is that? Why do we see different things in the same situation? Because we come from different walks of life, different life experiences, different occupations, different family situations, different age and gender, and the list can go on.

The question is what do we do with our differences? Ignore them? Yes, in the case of my basement, that'd be just fine. But, what if our feelings simmer and we are hurting? Again, I cannot speak for all of you, but for many of us, I assume that the big temptation is to ignore them, pretend that they do not exist or do not matter. Again, I cannot speak for all of you, but for me, another temptation hard to resist would be to go talk to someone, not the one by whom I feel offended, but the one who is most likely to take sides with me.

Yet, Jesus is clear in our lesson today. He does not want us to ignore our pains, hurts, and struggles. Neither does he want us to relieve our feelings and diffuse our tension by talking to a third person, thus creating unhealthy triangles. What Jesus wants us to do is not to simply keep things under control. Jesus wants us to transform these struggles into opportunities to grow healthier, deeper, and richer in our relationship with God and others. "*Go and talk to the person who hurt you,*" he says. Jesus urges us to address our differences and struggles in open, honest, respectful, and caring ways. Jesus urges us to speak truth in love, aware of our own limited perspectives and partial understanding. Jesus urges us to grow together as a community of faith, trusting in the presence of God in our shared life.

In our Old Testament lesson, we find the people of Israel in a time of crisis. Danger was looming ahead. They were facing a terrible night. And I am amazed to read that in the middle of these terrifying moments, God takes time to instruct God's people about who God is in the life they share.

Yes, my friends, then and now, God is with us. We are brought here together to be the church, the community of grace, where truth and love, trust and forgiveness prevail. Thanks be to God! Let us all stand and sing: Where Charity and Love Prevail.