



“Where We Few Are Gathered”

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Scripture (NRSV):

Matthew 18:20

²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Message:

The last time I did this was five years ago, the Sunday after Easter – another time when Pastor Andy assumed that the only people who were likely to be here are you folks who come most of the time, and that I won’t be likely to drive away. I can live with that.

I have a pastor friend who refers to Christmas and Easter as alumni days. So the attendance on the Sunday after Easter tends to be lower, as it does for Sundays in July and August. God knows – and God and everyone here knows – that I’m one of those folks who is not particularly good about being here in the summer. Because summer is a wonderful time of year to be somewhere else. And I’ve always been of the opinion that I don’t have to be HERE to worship God, to trust in God, to see God. In fact, sometimes I see God best when I’m camping or backpacking, communing with nature, as Pastor Andy and her family are going to be doing today and in days to come.

And I have to tell you; it doesn’t matter how many people are here. I feel incredibly blessed to be up here, and in your presence. This is a perspective I wish all of you could have, and it’s probably also my second-favorite view of the church – looking out at you people. I have to admit that my favorite view is from up there behind you, in the balcony. If you have never been in the balcony of this church, I urge you to, one of these days, just go up there and sit in one of those seats and spend some time just looking at this incredibly beautiful church.

And, by the way, I also have to admit that I haven't always felt as blessed as I do now to be in this church or in your presence as I could have been or should have been. For me, church – any church – has been a lot like Alcoholics Anonymous. As many of you know, more than 35 years ago I started going to AA meetings to get sober, something that happened only because of a serious religious experience and a new faith in God. But that's a story I've shared elsewhere, and at other times. I mention it today only because my church life has often somewhat mirrored my AA experience.

I went to meetings to get sober, and for awhile, that was enough. I was in need, and meetings with other people who also were in recovery, who were suffering, who were as screwed up as I was, was what I needed. Or at least part of what I needed.

Likewise, I went to church for me. I sought out what I needed – whether it was encouraging words from the sermon, enough progressive political activism to make me feel good about the association without my actually having to exert much effort, or just meeting with people who shared many of the same views I had. But that brings to mind Garrison Keillor's comment about the diversity of the Unitarian Church. You can tell Unitarians are diverse because there are so many different colors of Subarus in the parking lot.

Anyway, since I came to Spokane 19 years ago, I've attended three different churches for significant periods of time, officially belonging to two of those churches. I grew dissatisfied with each, and at one point even questioned whether I wanted to belong to this one. The reasons don't matter, because they were far more about me than about the church. The key point is that I didn't feel that the church – this church – was still giving me what I needed.

Sure, as a historian I appreciated the beauty of this building and the history of the church, which Pastor Andy has discussed in the past couple of weeks. I love the music of this church. We are so incredibly blessed to have Verne and Janet, and the other musicians in our congregation. Even if we don't normally get to hear the music of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, like we did last week, the music here is pretty amazing. In fact, the only bad thing about summer here – besides the August smoke of the past couple of years – is that members of the choir have a life like the rest of us and so they aren't all up here every Sunday. But we love and appreciate the ones who are.

But Westminster wasn't giving me what I thought I needed. Joanna and I talked about joining a bigger church, one where you could show up, get a week's worth of preaching, then disappear. People would be less likely to notice if you weren't there, and less likely to

play on your sympathies or your guilt to get you to do things – whether those things involve committee work, teaching Sunday school, volunteering with various projects. You know, actually BEING a church.

And after all, I have friends to attend big churches, with lots of people. They don't know most of the people they worship with, but they say they make up for the lack of closeness because those churches have more small groups. They have groups for young parents, for couples, for men, for women, people in recovery, for all sorts of things. So you can go to a big church where you know almost nobody, but then join a small group where pretty much everyone is like you.

That also means, of course, is that those people may never hang out in a meaningful way with people who are much different than they are.

I have friends who attend Life Center, and it may be a lovely church. I've never been there, but I looked at their website awhile back. It says prominently: "Church is better together – Sit with someone you know, or invite someone you love!" Now, I think that's cool in a way, but in another way that seems to me an unintentional acknowledgement of something sad – that their church isn't a place where you'll be challenged or encouraged to love someone you don't already know. 'Bring a friend, because you may not make any.'

I've never been to Life Center, so perhaps my judgment is unfair. I suspect it will survive my skepticism. And I suspect my views are somewhat colored by my own biases, my own failings, my own insecurities about faith and what a church should be.

Regardless, I found myself seriously considering going somewhere else, because, again, Westminster just wasn't giving me what I thought I needed. And then I remembered my AA experience. By the way, I don't encourage any of you to become drunks, but it has done wonders for my life.

See, the reason AA meetings helped me stay sober was partly because of the fellowship with other people who were as screwed up as I was, and partly because I was trying to work the 12-step program that came with it, what we might think of as the AA version of the Bible. But I had somewhat forgotten a more important part of it.

A big part of why I got sober was because of the people who were already there, people who had been there for a long time. When I was 25 years old, I had a guy tell me at an AA meeting, "You know, when I was 25 I'd never slept under a bridge, or been arrested for

drunk driving, or killed anybody. And since then I've done all those things." AA gave me the opportunity to learn from other people's experiences, and to draw from their strength at a time when I didn't have much of my own. Other people were there for ME. And now that I was getting better, I was regularly reminded that I need to be there for others who were struggling as I had.

But those people didn't even have to say anything. I could just see them living normal lives. They weren't living in a converted school bus, as I was. These were people who had normal jobs. They weren't working for minimum wage as migrant workers on an Easter Lily farm. They had normal lives with families that they actually knew and loved and got along with, that they hadn't totally disengaged from or alienated. And they were there for me. Not just for themselves. For me. And when I got better, I was reminded that I needed to be there for them and for others.

Seen in that light, church suddenly made more sense to me. It was admittedly difficult for someone with an ego like mine to grasp, but I finally realized that church – any church – wasn't all about me. Or even me and my personal relationship with God. It was about my relationship with God and God's people. You people.

And that is what I had in mind when Pastor Andy asked me last week what I'd like to discuss today. I even had today's scripture verse in mind. The verse, Matthew 18:20: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

One big problem is that, as with most things Biblical, I didn't actually understand the verse I was using.

What does Matthew 18:20 mean? Well, until this week, I always thought it meant that if there are two or more of us praying or worshipping together, that counted as a church. We obviously have a lot more people than that, so we're covered, right? But then Sara and Maxi and I all came here today in the same vehicle, so I guess maybe even my pickup qualified as a church this morning, or would have if we had been praying. Come to think of it, with my driving, maybe Sara and Maxi were praying.

But my pickup wasn't a church, and in doing research for this sermon I found out that I've apparently misunderstood that Bible verse all these years. In fact, taken in the proper context, at least some Biblical scholars argue that the verse is about sin and discipline in the church. Come to find out, in this Bible at least, it comes after a series of verses titled, "Sinning brother or sister." [Read the verses.]

Well, that puts a damper on things. So this verse that I thought was a Kumbaya verse, about how if Christians get together, Jesus is with them, actually is more like, “hey, Dudes, if someone is sinning and you need to confront them, and two or more of you agree that those ungodly sinners need to be spoken to and maybe punished, well, Jesus is on your side”.

By that perspective, if a few folks in the church decide that I’m a sinner – maybe because I’m gay, or because I eat shellfish, or because the clothes I’m wearing have more than one kind of fabric – I’m not just outnumbered two or three to one. I’m outnumbered two or three PLUS JESUS, to one.

I don’t know about your church history, but frankly there are a lot of us here who don’t need that kind of pressure.

Activists of all stripes like to recite one Margaret Mead quote, even if they don’t know for sure who Margaret Mead was. You may know that she was a cultural anthropologist whose work on the sexuality of primitive societies was sometimes controversial. You may know that she is sometimes blamed for contributing to the increased sexual openness of American society in the 1960s and ‘70s. You’re less likely to know that she was a member of the Anglican Church, even though she was almost certainly bisexual. We often don’t deal well with complex heroes, especially, it seems, if those heroes are women.

Still, Margaret Mead did offer that one succinct quote, which you’ve probably heard. It goes: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

It’s a nice quote, even if not entirely accurate. After all, I’d argue that a relatively small group of voters changed the world in 2016, but I don’t think that group was particularly thoughtful, and I suspect that many of them were more apathetic or frustrated than committed. People can change the world in a lot of ways, not all of them good.

But that’s a side issue. The key point is that it doesn’t take all that many people – that many of us – to change the world. And if those people are a church, isn’t that what we’re here for?

Those of us of a certain age remember when Diana Ross – who now, believe it or not, is 75 years old – was a member of Motown’s hottest group, the Supremes. (For you people who aren’t as old as I am, it was kind of like when Beyonce was the lead for Destiny’s Child, except even bigger.)

In 1970, she went out on her own and had her first solo hit. Anyone remember what it was?

The chorus went like this: “Reach out and touch somebody’s hand. Make this world a better place. If you can.” There are a couple of other verses, but mostly the song just repeats those lines:

“Reach out and touch somebody’s hand. Make this world a better place. If you can.” I like the fact that that last line is set apart. “If you can.” Because there are times when, frankly, I don’t feel like I can make the world a better place. I’m struggling enough to make myself better.

I’d like you to turn to pick up your bulletin. Notice what it says in various places:

Very first page: Note what it says first under “Church staff”: “All of God’s people.” We are number one in making this church work.

Second page: After the **passing of the peace**, where we literally reach out and touch each others’ hands, note the **opening hymn**. Note the **song of response**.

Third page: Note the song of parting.

Last page, under the section “Who we are”:

“We are a welcoming faith community who seek to strengthen our relationships with God and each other.”

Also notice that the third item under our values is “fellowship,” and under “Our Covenant,” the very first words are, “We covenant together.” That same section says we seek to “rejoice as a community – a **community** – of faith and trust,” and that we also seek to share our talents and resources. If we’re sharing, of course, that means it’s not all about us as individuals.

So guess what? Lo and behold, church isn’t all about me and God. And it’s not about you and God. It’s about US and God. It’s about us AS God, in a sense. Or at least as God’s hands.

On any given week, this church may or may not give me what I think I need. But maybe my being there on some Sundays helps give someone else what they need. And maybe the next week, they’ll be the ones giving me back what I need. Or giving you what you need.

So let me take this opportunity to thank you all for being the church I need. Even when I don’t know it. Amen.