



“Where Two or Three Are Gathered”

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Matthew 18:15-20 (MSG):

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ “If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell them—work it out between the two of you. If they listen, you’ve made a friend. If they won’t listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. If they still won’t listen, tell the church. If they won’t listen to the church, you’ll have to start over from scratch, confront them with the need for repentance, and offer again God’s forgiving love.

¹⁸⁻²⁰ “Take this most seriously: A yes on earth is yes in heaven; a no on earth is no in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this. When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action. And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I’ll be there.”

Sermon:

Did Jesus talk to the disciples about “the fellow believers” in conflict with one another in this way?

Did Jesus really say, “Tell the church”? There was no “church” when Jesus lived. He was a devout Jew, with Jewish friends and followers. He wasn’t starting “the church” in his lifetime! He was a Jewish reformer and rabbi, not the “head” of something new.

But by the time Matthew was composing his gospel, there was indeed a community of followers, and they did identify with their crucified and risen leader as the founder of a new community of faith, a “church”.

So, we find this text embedded in the gospel with the weight of authority of Jesus himself.

And I am impressed by the demand for patience, for a process of listening, for mediation and reconciliation.

But I am also awed by the words of warning regarding the power of language!

“Take this most seriously: A yes on earth is yes in heaven; a no on earth is no in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this.”

How deeply has the United States been chastened for its cruel and bigoted language in the past few months as the Black Lives Matter protests, marches and communications have come thundering out?

What you say matters. Representation matters. The truth matters.

How many times have I read, or heard it said, “You cannot say ‘all lives matter’ until you recognize that “black lives matter” as much as white lives. Which they do not, based on murders, shootings, discrimination, incarceration and more: Clearly white privilege and racism is smothering black lives. And the lives of other People of Color as well. Language, and action, diminished their humanity, allowed atrocity, suffocated their hope.

“What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this.” Those are Jesus’ weighty words.

We simply cannot pretend that sexist, racist, transphobic, homophobic, misogynistic words are “just words”.

If it is a joke...it is not funny. Don't say it.

If it is said in ignorance...then smarten up.

If it is said in immaturity of understanding...then grow up.

Words Matter. What you say has power, even eternal power, that is not forgotten in heaven or on earth.

So, when I tell you today, that Steve and Roger and volunteer facilitators of our church want you to stick around to look over the words that we use to describe ourselves...I don't want you to slink off zoom. I don't want you to skip the break-out rooms this week, because that isn't what you want to do.

No. Stay here. Stay with us.

Your words matter.

The words we used to define ourselves about ten years ago (*Who We Are and What We Believe*) so that we could go out and boldly say who Westminster was and what we stood for; and the Covenant, written long before that in the 1980's or 90's after a big old church

fight...these words matter. They are in our bulletin, in the Witness, in our publications about ourselves that are scattered around our building.

Do you know about them?

Do you use them to identify your belonging to this community of faith?

Do you feel confused or confounded by them?

If words matter, and we all know that they do...then these words should matter to you and to me.

I look to these words to describe Westminster when people say, "yes, but what do you believe?"

I look to these words when I introduce potential new members to our faith community. Sometimes I will use them in public writing, and in my public speaking. Because they are words we have chosen.

They are powerful words.

Are they yours?

The gospel writer tells us that the words we use, and the words we speak in this faith community are incredibly important, and even eternal.

In this time in our society, where there are so many hateful words, so many dumb words, so many words twisted and violently misused...

We the people of Westminster UCC must choose our words.

For these words can heal or wound.

Support or undercut.

Build up or destroy.

And we must be clear, that we choose our words to be like the words of Jesus: giving life, welcoming in, honest and true, and merciful and just.

Our words matter.

And what we say to one another is eternal.

We must mean this, with all our heart and all our soul.

Amen.