A Reconciling Faith

Matthew 18:15-20

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time 2017

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them.*

*Matthew 18:20*

Aloha kakou. Grace to you and peace from God and from the Lord Jesus Christ. It has been a while, exactly twenty years, to be precise, not that anyone is counting, or cares, for that matter. It was August 1997 when I shared with you my last Sunday as your pastor and went to assume leadership of one of the instrumentalities of our beloved denomination, the United Church of Christ. I have thought of you often in the intervening years, and as the apostle Paul shared with the church at Philippi, *I thank my God every time I mention you in my prayers. I’m thankful for all of you every time I pray, and it’s always a prayer full of joy. I’m glad because of the way you have been my partners in the ministry of the gospel from the time you believed it until now. I’m sure about this: the one who started a good work in you will stay with you to complete the job by the day of Christ Jesus.* [Phil 1:3-6] My time with you was so formative in who I am and for that I will be forever grateful.

Having said that, I am amazed by how much has changed: in my life and yours individually (we’ve all gotten a bit older, haven’t we), as a church here and throughout the world, in our community, our nation and world. But however we and the world around us have changed, we can be confident that the God we serve is unchanged in God’s guiding love for us. Let us pray: Still-speaking God, may we be attentive to your Spirit’s movement in our midst this day, eagerly listening for your Word for us. Through Christ our lord, amen.

Imagine this scenario, one that happens in more than a few churches every Sunday: the minister stands to begin the service as the accompanist ends the prelude. She looks out over the cavernous sanctuary and sees a dozen or so worshippers spread out throughout the pews. Disappointed by the diminishing numbers that attend services each Sunday, she tries to muster some enthusiasm amidst the discouragement she sees on the faces of the faithful and, if she is honest, in her heart as well. She smiles her best ministerial smile, and welcomes her parishioners. Trying to boost their fading morale, she encourages them: remember the words of our Lord, where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst. The meaning is clear: even though there are but a small number of us, we can take consolation in the fact that Jesus promised his presence in our midst if we gather in his name.

Those familiar words have become part of the vocabulary of many Christians, and they appear in our lectionary gospel reading for the day. And while we treasure these words of Jesus, they take on new meaning as we read them in the background of this teaching, and we would benefit by taking a step back in history to when the gospel writer penned these words to hear them anew in this context. Matthew writes these words in the infancy of the movement known as People of the Way. The word *church* had not entered the vocabulary of the day. And while those who were part of this movement had been transformed by God’s Spirit, they were still, well, people, kinda like you and me. As such, conflicts arose. Some were little tiffs, others centered on theological differences. People got their noses bent out of shape. They stopped talking to each other. If you read some of Paul’s letters, you’ll see some of the particular issues about which people fought. It is in this context, some fifty to sixty years after Jesus lived and died and was raised that Matthew recalled these words of Jesus: *If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together. If they listen to you, then you’ve won over your brother or sister. But if they won’t listen, take with you one or two others so that every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses. But if they still won’t pay attention, report it to the church. If they still won’t pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector.* [Mt. 18:15-17]

Strong words, huh? I’m not sure how many of us have followed this teaching to the letter. But before we delve into what this passage means, I want to share how I approach this and other teachings of Jesus. I don’t believe that Jesus intended his teachings to be interpreted as a prescription. What do I mean by this? When you go to the doctor for a particular ailment, often she will write you a prescription. You go to the pharmacy and get the prescription filled. On the bottle, it may say something like: *take one pill every four hours. Do not take on any empty stomach.* So, you follow the prescription to the letter. Jesus’ teachings are not intended to be a set of prescriptions, do A, B, and C. Jesus often tired of those who tried to make their relationship with God and how they lived out that relationship a set of rigid rules and regulations. Rather, he provided a kind of road map to get you to the destination. He wanted his hearers to get from point A to point B.

In order to understand fully **what** Jesus taught, it’s crucial to ask why he issued this particular road map and why Matthew thought to share it at this point. Obviously, there must have been a conflict between individuals in the community of faith. It matters little what the nature of that conflict was, nor does it matter who was right or wrong. What was important, for Matthew and for Jesus, was the restoration of the relationship and the well-being of the community. Get from point A to point B.

I remember preaching once in a UCC congregation in a rural community in the Midwest. The pastor told me of one of the members of the congregation who decided to retire after many years farming his 1,000 acres. When he announced his retirement, the two farmers whose farms bordered his were eager to buy up the land to expand their own operations. Both were members of that congregation and good lifetime friends. The ensuing attempt to buy out the land soon became contentious. People began to choose sides. And two families, members of the same church, lifetime friends, found themselves unable to speak to each other. That affected not only the church, but also members of the rural community in which they lived, small enough so that everyone knew everyone else’s business.

Jesus clearly seeks restoring relationships, as is Matthew. It should not escape our attention that Matthew places this teaching immediately following the parable of the lost sheep. The good shepherd so wants the lost one to be found and restored to the flock that he is willing to risk leaving the whole herd to find the lost one. Restoring relationships is godly business.

In the wake of the overthrow of apartheid in South Africa, Mandela, Archbishop Tutu and the rest of the new leadership did not do what new regimes often do, namely, alienate and marginalize their predecessors. They realized that it was important to restore right relationships, and for that to occur, they had to do the hard work of confronting the suffering, hatred, and bitterness that could have destroyed any attempt at a just and healthy society. So they established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a means to restorative justice. They believe that the only way that healing could take place was if those who suffered at the hands of a repressive regime could confront the perpetrators face to face and share their stories, their pain and loss. The goal was to restore both sides. Although not totally successful, it overwhelmingly provided healing for thousands, both the former oppressors and the formerly oppressed.

Church life can be messy. When we say *No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here*, we don’t know who will take that welcome seriously and join the journey of faith with us. God will throw us together with diverse people who we would not imagine would be part of our community. Out of that diversity will come clashes of cultures, thinking, being and believing. It will be messy. But if we believe that that is the way of God, which I do, then we must learn the way of Jesus, the way of truth and love. And if we are true to that process, Jesus promises, *Where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them.* Believe it, trust it, and give thanks for it.