

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

In our gospel reading this morning from Matthew, Jesus gives some advice about how faith communities ought to conduct themselves in times of stress. He also points out the responsibility his followers have in making or breaking that community, a responsibility which extends both on earth and in heaven. And, thankfully, he offers a familiar reassurance about his abiding presence, a presence which ought to be acknowledged and recognized. I think that these three elements ought to be kept in the forefront of our hearts and minds whenever we presume to be gathered as church. Conduct, responsibility, and recognition, I think, are important components of our intention to be the Body of Christ together in the place and time where God has located us. And they each involve using one of the greatest gifts God has given us: the liberty to make choices, to use our free will. And I don't think it would be presumptuous to say that in God's dream for creation, there is hope that we would make choices which would be useful, helpful, and faithful.

But, you might ask yourself, when two or three are gathered, what could possibly go wrong?! I mean, we are baptized, have made vows and promises, have passed the peace to one another...what could possibly go wrong? I was home from college late in the summer of 1968, after taking a hitchhiking trip across the country and back. It was good to be home, and to go to church with my family. We were active members of a large suburban Methodist church, a faith community where I had grown up and felt the warmth of family from every pew. That summer we were approaching the climax of an election year, and opinions and loyalties were running high, as I recall. And that morning in church, our pastor, our minister, chose to preach about the immorality of the Vietnam war. Was it a good choice? Was it a helpful, useful, and faithful choice? Probably. Was his conduct appropriate? Did he feel he was taking his responsibilities seriously? Did he make that choice with the reassurance that Jesus was present in that community?

Now, in that congregation there were many who had fought in WWII and Korea, and when the topic of the pastor's sermon became apparent, one of the gentlemen, an active, well-liked, and well-respected church member, stood up and walked out. His departure was obvious, and a bit of a shudder passed through the congregation. He returned a few minutes later, still during the sermon, wearing his VFW hat. He strode up the center aisle to the front, looked the minister in the eye, then returned to the pew where his family was seated, and sat purposefully. Did he make a good choice? Was it a helpful, useful, and faithful choice? Was his conduct appropriate? Did he feel he was taking his responsibilities seriously? Did he make that choice with the reassurance that Jesus was present in that community? When two or three are gathered, what could possibly go wrong? Well, despite what you might be expecting as I tell this story, there was no great wave of discord in the days that followed, no expressions of anger or resentment, no lasting disruption of that church's ministries. Just a heightened awareness of different viewpoints.

Did I mention that that church was spiritually very healthy? That the presence of Christ was truly recognized there and then? I don't know for sure, but I expect that those two men took Jesus' advice and met privately when they had the opportunity to be alone together and discussed what had happened and why. Both, I know, continued to be faithful, well-respected members of that community. So, what was bound together in that incident and that which followed? What was bound and what was loosed on earth and in heaven? Jesus gives the disciples, his faithful followers,

his “church”, the authority to bind and loose, and the liberty to make the choice. In our Bible study Thursday evening, we discussed just what he might have meant by that. He gives the church the authority to make decisions like this, but reminds us that what we decide will have long-lasting implications. What you bind on earth will be bound likewise in heaven. If you bind up a grudge and stick to it, it may never go away. If you bind up a friendship, however, even in the midst of disagreement, it may last forever. By the same token, if you loosen your grip and don’t take things so personally, your forgiveness may continue to bear good fruit over the long run. But if you thoughtlessly loosen the bonds of fellowship, you might never get it back again.

This binding and loosening is all about being the Body of Christ. It is all about our vows and promises. It is all about the best use of our free will. It is Jesus reminding us that we have a responsibility to one another in this church, in this generation, in this life and the next. As God’s dream daily creates fresh, new opportunities for us, we ought to make choices which are intentionally helpful, useful, and faithful. In our reading from his Letter to the Romans, Paul wants his church members to know that all God’s scriptural commandments, all God’s expectations, all God’s teachings, may be summed up by the phrase “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All those prohibitions against covetousness, murder, disrespect, theft, and so on, are summed up in the commandment of Jesus to those who have ears to hear and eyes to see the light. The disgraceful evils of debauchery, licentiousness, jealous rage, and racism can be avoided if we but love one another as Jesus teaches. Their infectious seeds are even deprived of the dank, muddy soil in which they are want to grow, if we but choose the tie that binds our hearts in love. Love, as Paul preaches, is the fulfillment of the law.

And what of those who have refused to hear the message or see the light? On Thursday evening at our study, we found the words of Jesus to be troubling when he instructed his followers to treat those offenders as they would heathen gentiles or ruthlessly dishonest tax-collectors. Did Jesus mean that we should shun them and have nothing to do with them? Was he writing-off such sinners as a lost cause? Considering that both his critics and sometimes even his friends complained that he was spending way too much time sharing meals with sinners and seeking them out, that seems doubtful. When he says that we should treat offenders as heathens, I think he meant that we, too, should seek them out rather than shun them. How else could we model for them the benefits of deliberately choosing conduct which bears good fruit and blessings? How else could we spread the good news Jesus was sent to distribute?

And the good news is that Jesus has promised that if two or three are gathered in his name, and agree about that for which we ask, it will be done by God. To be gathered in Jesus name means to be bound together by grace, for grace is that which is embodied by Christ. Grace, unconditional love, is made manifest, incarnate, and present in the person of Jesus. And that person is reliably present when we gather, even online I hope, to practice that which he has been teaching for so long now. Even in the simplest conduct, like taking the time to give thanks for blessings together at mealtimes, we give recognition to Christ’s presence among the two or three, or more, who are gathered. And his presence brings the wholeness of grace with it. That presence is a healing presence, reminding us that disagreements, even legitimate ones, are not enough to loosen our fellowship in Jesus’ trustworthy name.

Loving God, by your grace you have gathered us from many walks of life to become a loving family at St. John’s. Help us sustain the miraculous love within this parish, and guide us in sharing this love with our neighbors. All this we ask through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

