

A Reflection on Matthew 18:15-20

Our text from Matthew's gospel is brief--just six verses with the primary focus on the relationship of church members to one another. The text can, I believe, be divided into three parts.

Verses 15-17 offers a way to deal with church member conflicts.

Verses 18-19 assures the church of divine approval, or ratifications, of its decisions.

Verse 20 points to Christ's promise always to be with us.

Let me briefly unpack each part.

The first part (verses 15-17) offers a process for dealing with someone who has wronged you. First go and talk to him (or her). If that doesn't work, take two others with you as witnesses, and if that doesn't work, bring him before the church. If he fails to listen to the church, then treat him as a tax collector or Gentile. Obviously Individuals and groups who were clearly undesirables for the early church. Some have read this excommunication.

Also if you are familiar with conflict resolution strategies, especially biblical concepts then you will know verses 15-17 of Matthew 18 is a primary strategy for resolving conflicts.

Verses 18-19, I think refers to the divine acceptance of decisions made by the church. Just a couple chapters back in chapter 16, we find Jesus telling Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (verse 19)

There is an interesting footnote in my bible indicating that, *The keys of the kingdom* are a symbol of Peter's power as the leader of the church. The footnote also indicated that *bind* and *loose* were rabbinic terms meaning "permit" or "forbid" about some action to which a question has been raised.

Judaic tradition handed on sayings to the effect that whenever two or three Rabbis discussed words of the Torah they were attended by the divine presence.

That then brings us to verse 20 where Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

I believe the flow of the narrative, moving from what was conferred on Peter in chapter 16, is now conferred upon all the apostles in chapter 18.

The binding and loosing referred to in these verses are now employed with discipline and reconciliation in the congregation. Even if the gathered community number only two or three, heaven is alert to the business being transacted, and the living Christ is present (verse 20). This is a promise for us today, as much as it was during in post-Easter congregations.

Verse 20 reminded me of an article I read several years ago about critical mass. In a previous life, I worked in conventional power plants. However, part of my training included an introduction to nuclear power. I don't remember much about the operation of nuclear plants, but I do remember a chart showing a nuclear chain reaction or Critical Mass being the minimum amount of nuclear material needed to start and sustain a chain reaction.

The article I read was about a different understanding of Critical Mass. On the last Friday of the month, in major cities around the world, bicyclists, along with skateboarders, unicyclists, inline skaters and so forth have taken to the streets 'en masse' to bring attention to alternative modes of transportation.

The first event was held in San Francisco in 1992 to bring attention to the "unfriendly attitude" of motorists toward bicyclists in the city. The article said "The gathers have been described as protestors by some, as spontaneous gatherers by others, and as a celebration by still others. Collectively they are called Critical Mass".

From a relatively small beginning, gatherings around the world have made it a sustained international event that has been labelled ***Critical Mass***.

So a Critical Mass is the minimum number of people needed to start and sustain an action, and Jesus points to Critical Mass when he said: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Matthew 18:20

Churches are usually far more than just two or three people. I don’t know about Lutheran church structure, and I doubt many are interested in United Methodist structure, but I am equally sure that both denominations have committees for administrative, mission, program activities, and so forth, committees requiring more than two or three people to get the work done.

Remember, critical mass is that which is necessary to start and sustain an action. So two or three people gathered in the name of Christ, gathered as the church has the potential to set the world on fire figuratively speaking. To overcome that which ill, that which is harmful, with love, compassion and hope.

The couple thousand bicyclists who gathered in San Francisco on the last Friday of September 1992, started a chain reaction that now involves millions of people around the world. They wanted to overcome the “unfriendly attitude” of motorists toward bicyclists.

Just think what has been achieved, and what can be achieved, when two or three are gathered in Christ’s name. Think of the potential of Critical Mass in Christ’s name!

I have selected ***Pass It On*** as the hymn of the Day. Just consider what a spark can do.

It only takes a spark to get a fire going,
and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing.
That’s how it is with God’s love once you’ve experienced it;
you spread his love to everyone; you want to pass it on.

Amen.

Sources:

Preaching Through the Christian Year A, Fred Craddock, et al. Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1992. page 432

The New Interpreters Bible Vol V111, pp 378-379

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