

2013 Annual Meeting – “Two or Three Together” ©
Reverend Seth D Jones
Romans 13:8-15; Matthew 18:15-20; Is 43:5
Communion Sunday

During the beginning of the Reformation back in the 1500s and early 1600s, people became very interested in the words of Scripture.

This was because of the printing press and, as a result of the printing press, Martin Luther was able to switch the focus of the faith away from hierarchy, from invested human authority, to the words of Scripture themselves.

Very quickly, Scripture –
the words on the page of the word of God–

became the sole guide for understanding God's work in the world.

For the first time in church history, everyone who was able to read had reasonably easy access to something to read because of the printing press.

Further, it became very easy to teach people to read because access to books and printed material became much more prevalent.

So people gathered together to read what Scripture said, rather than just what the preacher or the church authorities had to say. Back then, as it is now, people who learned to read began to read Scripture and were able to see what it says for themselves.

As Congregationalists, we proclaim that the ability to do this –
this reading of God's word to us and the ability to understand and interpret it –
as a gift of the Holy Spirit.

From this gift, we glean the truth of Isaiah 43 -

“Fear not, for I am with you always.”

Because our conscience is formed by our relationship to Jesus Christ and God,
the Holy Spirit governs our personal expression of what we have found in Scripture.

This is also called the

“right of interpretation according to every believer”.

In the very early 1600s a few educated men who were reading Scripture for themselves discovered again these verses we read today from the Gospel of Matthew and began to exert this *right of interpretation*:

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

William Bradford and William Brewster read those words and, with John Robinson and others, formed a small group of Christians who wanted to worship in the way they felt the Spirit called them to worship as Christians.

They met in the basement of William Brewster's home in Scrooby, England, and began to form their small church of renewed followers of Christ.

They trusted the Scripture they read, believing God was with them in their faithful gathering together, just as Jesus promised them.

In the face of persecution at home in England, these early Puritans held close to the knowledge God was with them.

They knew and felt fear, but it did not determine their future.

Many of you know the story from there:

the men and women of this group became the Pilgrims who moved to Holland, and then from Holland to the New World. The Pilgrims in Plymouth laid the groundwork for the American Puritans, who came to form the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and were the foundation for the first Congregational Church established in Salem in 1627. We in this Congregational Way are the inheritors of this great tradition, and we find the motivation for its creation in the assurance of God and Christ that we need not fear because God is with us whenever and wherever we gather in Christ's name.

The Pilgrims were charting out new territory of what it means and what it looks like to be a church.

They made a great crossing and established markers of what makes a Christ-centered church.

Our Gospel reading, Matthew 18, is one of those markers of the Puritan church, something known as '*church discipline*'.

We need to understand our Congregational catchphrase in the context it is spoken.

John Calvin said

the presence of church discipline,

along with the Gospel preached faithfully

and the sacraments delivered correctly,

were the marks of a Christian church.

In other words, wherever those three things were present,
you knew you were in a wholly Christian church.

But let me ask you – have you ever been a part of a group or church that practiced Matthew 18?

Let me read it to you again:

15 "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault when the two of you are alone.

If he listens to you, you have regained your brother.

16 But if he does not listen,

*take one or two others with you, so that **at the testimony of two or three witnesses every matter may be established.***

17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

If he refuses to listen to the church, treat him like a Gentile or a tax collector.

What is strange to me is what has happened since this was written.

It sounds harsh, doesn't it?

Has anyone here ever Matthew 18'd anyone or been Matthew 18'd?

We associate these words with threatening things like excommunication or the practice of banishment,
like the Puritans throwing Roger Williams and Anne Hutchison to the swamplands of Rhode Island.

But I think we need to hear these words, if we are going to use them, again as

***the currency of forgiveness** in the transactions of human relationships.*

Just before this, Jesus tells us that

“your Father in heaven is not willing that one of these little ones be lost.”

God will search you out and will carry you back to the flock if you go astray.

This image is so important when we read these verses about church discipline and Jesus being with us.

A shepherd cannot show any anger or aggressiveness toward ~~an~~ lamb,

otherwise when the lamb grows up the sheep associate fear and terror

with the one who is meant to care for them.

Instead, a shepherd goes out in concern and hope,

and rejoices and shows love and gentleness

to the one who has been lost,

like a father running out in forgiveness to a prodigal son.

If we are going to say that wherever two or three or more assemble, Christ is present,

then it seems imperative that we seek to act and be like Christ the Shepherd in our relationships with one another.

We must trust God in such a way we do not fear the present or the future.

We must trust that God and Christ are with us, like our Pilgrim and Puritan forefathers and foremothers.

It is most definitely a kind of church discipline, a way allowing God to change us,

not the authority of human beings.

Paul's phrase for this trust is a powerful one: he says in Romans 13,

"...put on the weapons, the armor, of light...

put on the Lord Jesus Christ."

Imagine that.

When you wake up in the morning and get dressed for the day,

do you put on our Lord Jesus Christ to begin your day?

When you are preparing yourself to face the day, whether it be a day of work,

a day of recovery from illness,

another day of pain,

or even a good day,

do you put on the weapons of light which allow you to

become the eyes, the hands and the feet of Christ

in a world that cries out for redemption?

What would it be like to enter your day knowing you are wearing Christ,

and are protected by the weapons of light with which the Holy Spirit has invested us?

It is a beautiful, strange and moving image.

It is that image,

the putting on of Christ, the putting on of the weapons of light,

which motivated William Brewster and William Bradford and those 100 or so other brave souls who came across

the Atlantic all those centuries ago.

They knew the power of *two or three gathered together*,

the power in a faith which trusted God was with them.

They knew the power of people gathering in prayer, covenanting with God and with one another, for a life transformed in Christ and in the Spirit.

I don't want to warp their theology into a feel-good message though.

Absolute trust in God means a resolute approach to a broken, painful, suffering world.

This is not an easy place, this life, this world.

The Pilgrims lived out a pretty existential understanding of their relationship with God.

They knew there was no filament separating them from the struggles and pain of everyday life.

Separating us from struggle and pain is not what God does;

it is not God's way.

The Cross tells us otherwise.

Instead, God leads.

God shepherds.

God saves and God assures us.

God walks with us; Jesus walks with us.

A God who keeps us away from the brokenness of the world

is a God who does not really care about the world God created,

a God who is not interested in redemption and transformation.

If you and I are not transformed by the work of God in us and in the world,

who then will participate in the redemption and transformation God wishes for all of Creation?

The reason I say that is because,

even though redemption and transformation of the world and of each of us is completely and totally the work of God and the Holy Spirit, we are called to gather together to do the work of God in the world.

God will do what God does,

but we are called to participate in the great work.

Lay aside the works of darkness and wake up for your salvation is near,

Paul says again in Romans 13. .

We need to do something for and with God, once we have put on the armor of light and Christ, once we have accepted the assurance that Christ is with us whenever we gather together.

Jesus is with us when we assemble in his name, two or three or twenty or three hundred or 2000.

But Jesus being with us means *actually getting together to do things for Jesus Christ* and for the future God has set for us.

William Carey, the great missionary to India in the early 1800s, used to say,

Do extraordinary things for God. Expect extraordinary things from God.

William Carey meant we need to do the work God calls us to do.

I believe what he also means is that we are not awakened to the presence of God and Christ if we are not doing the work of God and Christ.

I am hopeful what the Lord will do for the NACCC.

As a pastor, it is easy to look at what is happening in the church of today and take it personally.

What shall we *do*?

What will be our markers of our churches, our association?

I want the pews filled, like you do.

I want the Sunday School rooms full, like you do.

But this, what we do as churches, no longer attracts young people

and most young people today may have never been to church.

All they know is what the media and the world tells them about Christian life.

I want a thriving, active church.

And the NACCC is trying to work its way through these things as an association.

Gathering together in Christ's name,

in the presence of Jesus Christ,

in the presence of a God who,

even in the midst of all our fears,

will always be with us means always being attentive to

the needs of the people,

the needs of the community,
and the needs of our spiritual lives,
worshiping, caring,

and now, in this day and age, just being there as a Christ-follower.

These are the weapons of light and this is how we put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Like the lamb lost in the canyon and the woods,
all of those needs require the gentle touch of Jesus Christ.

When two or three gather together,
and we put on Jesus Christ, the armor of light,

it is in that gentle touch of forgiveness and welcoming back those who would return to God,
in the gentle touch of the words heard, read and sung,
in the gentle touch of sharing the sacraments together,
it is in *those marks of the church*, our Congregational churches,
that we see and join together in the presence of Christ.

It is in that gentleness of Christ,
that **soft discipline** which encourages, builds up and fosters spiritual depth and hope
that the powers of heaven and earth become available to the followers of Christ.

It means we, as the church of Christ,
can't sit and wait for God to do something.

God is always doing something.

When we gather together to do the work of the church, the work of being the church,
are we willing,

like William Brewster, William Bradford, John Robinson
and the Pilgrims they led all those years ago,

are we willing to be conformed to God's will,
to wear the armor of God, to put on Jesus Christ?

We are being formed by

our belief God is with us and we have nothing to fear, ,

our gathering together,
our communion with one another,
our practice of faith and prayer,

all ways we put on Jesus Christ as God's covenanted people.

We are called to gather together –

two or three or twenty or thirty or two hundred or three hundred –
to be the active, working people of God.

And all these are bound by the primary covenant,
the first promise we honor as Christians, the fulfillment of all God has promised -
Christ crucified and Christ resurrected.

Like William Brewster and William Bradford and the small group of Pilgrims in Plymouth Bay,
and in that promise of the Prophet Isaiah and in Jesus' promise to the disciples,

we ask for Christ's presence among us,
that our church be a working image,
an active symbol of the power of Christ's cross and resurrection
in our lives,
in the lives of others
and in the continuing creation of God.

Amen.