

**Date: September 10, 2017**

**Scripture: Matthew 18:15-20**

**Title: STICK TOGETHER**

Our lesson today from Matthew's Gospel, reminds me of a story of a pastor in a drought-stricken part of Alabama last summer, who implored his people to pray for rain. In fact, he asked each member of the church to join in a prayer vigil that would continue day and night until God granted their request. There had never been a greater sense of urgency in that church. At any hour, you might pass that small rural church and find the lights on, and someone at the altar praying. Finally, late Wednesday evening, some dark clouds began to roll in. Soon rain began falling in torrents. For four straight days it rained without ceasing. The creeks began overflowing their banks. It became necessary to evacuate people from their homes. Still the water kept rising. The entire community was now under water.

As rescue workers made their way in a boat through the flood water evacuating the last reluctant stragglers, one boat passed that little country church, almost completely submerged. There sat the pastor on the roof of the church with a look of grand satisfaction on his face. He could be heard saying to himself, with flood waters around him, "Not bad for a small church like ours. Not bad."

Jesus said, "If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven." That's a stunning endorsement of corporate prayer. It's important that we pray, but it's even more important that we pray together. We're a community. This saying of Jesus is part of a larger passage that emphasizes the importance of love among believers.

Bruce Larson tells about a conversation Ruth Seabury, a missionary in India, had with a Hindu social worker. At one point, the social worker asked Ruth, "Do you think most Christians know what they've got?" Perplexed by the question, she asked what he had in mind. He said, "Every religion has a god. Every religion has an altar. Every religion has worshipers. Every religion believes in sacrifice. But only Christians have a Savior and only Christians have a congregation." Do we know what we've got? We're grateful we have a Savior. But, it's impossible to overstate the importance of the congregation. We're not simply an assembly of individuals. We're the body of Christ. Christ has called us into a sacred community.

**We see in today's passage, that in the family of Christ, we're responsible for one another.** Jesus says, "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you." This is a tough teaching of our Lord. It's one that's often overlooked because many of us shy away from confrontation of any kind. Our creed is,

“Live and let live.” And yet, confronting a fellow believer who’s involved in a sin of any kind, can be the most loving thing, the most Christ-like thing, we can do.

In this passage, Christ is calling us as a community, to hold one another accountable for our behavior. Christ is not calling us to pass judgment on one another, but to care enough about one another, to intervene if we see a friend is about to make a serious mistake.

A well-known Christian author tells of praying for a friend whom she knew had become involved in an extra-marital affair. One Sunday she happened to be sitting behind her friend in church. During the prelude, she leaned forward and put her hands lovingly on her friend’s shoulders and whispered, “Be careful that you don’t throw away something very beautiful. I’m praying for you.”

The friend involved in the affair began weeping softly and almost immediately broke off this illicit relationship. Years later the Christian author attended a high school graduation. One of the young people graduating was the son of the woman who had been having the affair. This woman came up to the author and gave her a big hug. “You were so right,” she said with gratitude. “If you had not spoken those words to me that day, I would have thrown away nearly everything that was important to me. Thank you so much.”

Jesus said, “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you.” Don’t make a big deal of it. Do it in a loving manner. Keep the conversation between the two of you, forever confidential.

What an important passage of scripture. But, quite honestly, this would be very difficult for most of us to do. It requires a great deal of love. It also requires a great deal of courage. Author Chuck Colson says, “Too often, we confuse love with permissiveness. Colson points out that the eighteenth century spiritual giant, our John Wesley, was so concerned with building accountability that he devised a series of questions for his followers to ask each other every week. Questions like: Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am? In other words, am I a hypocrite? Am I honest in all my acts and words or do I exaggerate? Do I confidentially pass on to another what was told to me in confidence? Can I be trusted? Am I a slave to dress, friends, work or habits? Do I disobey God in anything? Is Christ real to me?

Each week the believers would ask these questions of each other. Obviously, some found this rigorous system of inquiry too demanding and left. Today, the very idea of such a procedure would horrify many churchgoers. But, that’s the first thing we need to see in today’s passage, we have a responsibility for one another.

**The second thing we need to see is, the power of a praying church.** Jesus says, “Again, truly I tell you, that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.”

What an amazing statement. I’ll be the first to admit that I don’t fully understand what Christ is saying to us with these words, but I do know there’s much power when Christian people work together, pray together, laugh together and shed tears together. That has always been the strength of the Christian movement. That’s our task. That’s the ministry to which Christ has called us, to be a caring community. To reach out in sympathy and support, to those who are in distress. To rejoice with those who rejoice, and to weep with those who weep. We have what the world desperately needs and can’t supply. We have a Savior and we have Christian love and fellowship. We may not be articulate theologians, but we can be a friend to one another and to the world.

Kahlil Gibran once remarked, we can forget those with whom we have laughed, but we can never forget those with whom we have cried. Millions of persons who have been through trying times, and have felt the support of one or two brothers or sisters in Christ, will testify to the power of that support.

What a grand opportunity Christ has given us. We’re responsible for one another. There’s much power in a church that’s united in prayer and service to one another. And, there’s a reason for that.

**The body of Christ is much more than the sum of its individual parts, “For where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them.” That’s the crowning conclusion to this passage.**

The whole meaning of Christian faith is contained in the word, relationship, a relationship with God and a relationship with one another. As Frederick Buechner has written: “Faith is not so much believing this or that about God, as it is hearing a voice which says, ‘Come unto Me.’ We hear the voice and then we start to go without really knowing what to believe, either about the voice or about ourselves. And yet we go. Faith at this point, is standing in the darkness, and a hand is there, and we take it.”

To expand on Buechner’s analogy, we take the hand of God, and then we reach out in the darkness, taking hold of the hand of a neighbor. That’s who we are, and what we’re about.

Pastor David Utley tells about a Christian man who knew his time was near. So he sent word to his family to come home, so he could see them one last time. After they had been home awhile visiting, the father called all of them into his room, he had been bedfast for weeks.

When they entered, they formed a line around his bed, so he could see all of them. He then told them to go outside and bring back a nice-size stick. Seeing the shape their father was in, they each went out in the yard and brought back a big stick.

After everyone got their stick, they all gathered around the father. He then told them to start breaking the sticks one by one. After everyone broke their stick he then told them to go back outside and get another stick.

This had seemed very odd to his children, but they did what they were told. After they got a stick and gathered around his bed, he told them to pass the sticks and make one stack, then bring them to him. When they had done this, he pulled out some fishing line and told them to tie the bundle tightly at each end. He then told his children to try and break the sticks. One by one they all tried to break the bundle of sticks but couldn't do it. The father responded by saying, "I just want you to know if you stick together it will be harder to break you."

What's true of a family, is true of a church as well. The closer we are to Christ, and the closer we are to each other, the greater impact we will have on our world.

A rural pastor sits on top of his partially submerged church and says proudly, "Not bad for a small church like ours." Do we know what we have? We have what the world desperately needs, a Savior and a congregation. "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love . . ." In Christian Love let us all Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.