

Sermon Draft

Text: Matthew 18:15-20

Sermon: "People"

Will Rogers was once asked, "What's wrong with the world?"

And he replied, "People!" Of course, he was being humorous.

Others have been seriously cynical concerning the human race.

One said, "The world would be a pretty good place to live if it weren't for the people in it."

But, I think we human creatures still have some pretty good things going for us. With all our flaws and shortcomings, I don't think we're hopeless. And I don't believe God sees us that way either. For, after all, as we read in John 3:16, "**God so loved**" us that he has given his own beloved Son in our behalf.

One of the fine things about us is our disposition to be together with one another. On our mountain tops and in our valleys, we tend to seek and find the company of one another. On occasions of joy, we seldom celebrate alone we are inclined to gather together for birthdays and weddings and the various happy milestones we pass along the way. And when sorrow comes - when there is grief or pain we usually do not move through these times alone.

People we know and love stand with us in our losses, sit with us through long, dark nights of loneliness or dread. I think, that in our joys we invite others to come and share them, and in our sorrows the others come and help us bear them. And, of course, for many other reasons and in many other ways, we human persons enter into the lives of one another.

When Jesus came, he called some people together, saying: Come, be with me. And they came, from their fishing boats and their fields and their homes, and they were together with him. As about three years of time went by, Jesus summoned others yes, he invited everyone. Those who came he called disciples, and the whole group of these he called the church, the Greek "ecclesia," meaning "the ones called out." Thus, the church of Jesus Christ is that number of persons who have been called out from wherever they were and have come to be together with him.

In Matthew 18:15-20 we have some words of Jesus concerning what should happen in the church when relationships are put under tension, when one person sins against another. He talks about the healing process, about a procedure for reconciling differences, about the involvement of the whole church whenever there are problems between persons.

The ramification of what Jesus says here is so vast that we could spend many weeks looking at how we live and deal with one another. But we won't, one thing is clear: The people of our Lord, together with him, constitute a unique kind of gathering together of individual persons. Whatever else our text from Matthew may say, it is a word for the Christian community, it is an insight into the character and dynamics of Christian fellowship. It is saying that the being together of the Lord's people is a matter of the very highest significance.

Jesus tells us if, "***If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.***" (Matthew 18:19) And Jesus promises always to be with his people. Jesus says, "***Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.***"

With these sayings, Jesus is addressing a message to the Christian community, to the church, to the ingathered assembly of his disciples. He is saying that there is a tremendous value in our being together, that in our togetherness we have advantages otherwise impossible. So, let us think about this a little, about The Lord's People Together - in disciplined fellowship.

Three dimensions of relationship are immediately apparent. First: Each person together with each other. Second: Each person together with all others. And third: All persons, the whole church, together with Christ. As people of God we are together physically with one another and we are together in spirit and mind and purpose; we are together in the love for God through our Lord Jesus Christ; we are bound together in Him.

Consider for a moment the first dimension of this relationship, the relationship of a person with a person. This, of course, is important anywhere, but in the Christian community it is critical. It is so critical, in fact, that Jesus says here that if the relationship between any two persons in the community is put under strain, it is a matter of concern for the whole church.

In the early days of our Faith, when primitive Christians suffered horrible persecutions, the relationships among the followers of Christ were extremely precious to them. This was a common scene in the drama of those tense and dangerous times: A man who has come to know and love Christ is walking alone when he meets a stranger. As the two men pause to exchange greetings, the one wonders who the other is, not so much his name or the town from which he comes, but is this man perchance a Christian also, a follower of the Way?

The Christian man does not dare say, "I'm a Christian; are you one also, perhaps?" For to be a Christian is a crime punishable often by death, and the Christian may be in jeopardy to identify himself. But he hungers for fellowship, his spirit yearns for the touch of a kindred spirit.

So, with his walking-stick he traces in the dust of the road the shape of a fish or the form of a cross, for these are the symbols of the new-born Faith, and the people of the Way know the meaning of them. If the stranger makes no response to the signal, a superficial kind of conversation continues briefly, courteous goodbyes are said, and the two men go their ways.

But if that pictured symbol on the ground is identified by the stranger, he silently traces a similar sign alongside the first, and the two men rejoice together. There is probably a handclasp, perhaps an embrace.

Then, if no one is listening, they talk of things in the two Christian communities they represent, the ways their brothers and sisters cope with the hostilities that surround them. They talk about the wonders of Christ and the meaning of their faith. At last, as they part, each goes his way with a sense of new strength, with a new courage for hard tasks, with vision lifted and the flame of hope burning more brightly than before.

Those primitive Christians really needed one another. Being together was the very heartbeat that kept them alive. Of course, the Spirit of God was their empowerment, the Holy Spirit whom Christ had sent.

Frankly and unashamedly, those people needed one another. For their worship and study and prayer, they diligently contrived to meet and be together.

Although their meeting was usually at risk of their very lives, one of their number wrote, "***Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together.***" (Hebrews 10:25).

And this brings us to the second dimension of relationship within the Christian community: that is, each person together with all others. The Apostle Paul teaches in 1st Corinthians 12 and elsewhere that the Lord's people are the body of Christ. Each part is a part of the whole body. The body is an assembly of parts. Without its parts, the body is not. By its parts the body exists. But a number of severed parts do not make a body, it is their assembly, their being together, which does that. As part of the Christian community need each other. A hand cannot function unless it is organically related to a body, unless it is what the body needs it to be, unless it does what the body needs to have it do.

Some trees may grow in isolated grandeur, standing alone on a wide expanse of windswept plain; but not the Redwoods, mighty and mammoth as they are, they grow only in clusters, each together with all the others. So, in the Christian community, the individual is nurtured by the body.

Also, the individual bears a responsibility to the body. If a hand puts poison into the stomach, the whole body will die. The hand cannot always behave by direction of its own whim; it must do what is best for the body of which it is part. So, it must surrender all notions of doing as it jolly well pleases.

At the inception of the American Revolution, Patrick Henry stirred the fervor of Virginia's patriots by shouting, "**Give me liberty or give me death!**" A noble sentiment indeed but one cannot run a baseball team on that, or a football squad, for each player must give up something for the team.

One cannot operate an army on that, or build a marriage on it.

And neither can one build a church on it.

In the Christian community each person should be together with each other, and each together with all others. Now this third dimension of relationship: All should be together with Christ. The Christian community is a disciplined fellowship.

In a way, a football team is such a fellowship; that is, all players are amenable to the mind of the coach, responsive to his will, subject to his direction. In 1 Corinthians 1:10, Paul pleads with the people of that church that they **"all agree and that there be no divisions among them but that they be united in the same mind and the same judgement."**

The same mind - but whose? Not that you should have my mind, or that I should have your mind, but that both of us should have the mind of Christ.

The disciplined fellowship does not lie in your yielding your will to mine, or in my yielding my will to yours, but in both of us yielding our wills to Christ. In the Christian community, what really holds the people together is an identity of each person with One beyond them all. To be together with another is what makes the church the church.

Paul writes also in 1st Corinthians: "**...do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.**" (1 Corinthians 6:19)

The Greek word "Idios" or "idia" is a word having to do with one's self, or with that which belongs to one. From this word comes our English word "idiot," and all of us know the tragic and state of one who is an idiot. The word means "one who belongs to himself."

An idiot is narrowly self-contained, wrapped up in a very small world, part simplistically real and part illusion. As Christians, we are not our own; we have broken out of this small world; we belong to Christ.

While visiting an asylum for the insane, a visitor observed the large number of patients and the small number of those who cared for them. Speaking with the head of the institution, the visitor said, "Aren't you afraid that sometime all these people might get together, gang up on you, and overpower you?" "No," was the answer, "Don't you realize that crazy people never unite on anything?" And this is true. Each is so much his own that he cannot enter into union with anybody.

Well, my friends, as Christians we are a united people - united in and with Christ and therefore with one another. We are together with one another if we are together with Him.

And our being together is our best help for living a Christian kind of life and our best aid in doing the work we are called to do in the world. To be together, each with each other, each with all others, and all with Christ.

Let me share one more story which points to the importance of what we've been talking about. A small child was lost in a vast, dark swampland. Family members, neighbors, friends, and strangers from far and near gathered in the area and searched frantically for a long time. At last someone said, "The swamp is so wide, and somewhere out there we are missing the child as we go back and forth. If we would join hands, and so keep ourselves in one straight, continuous line, and walk abreast carefully from this side of the swamp to the other, if the child is in there, surely we will find her."

This was done: the long column made its sweep across the darkness - and the child was found, but not alive - dead from long exposure and injury and fear. As the tiny body was being carried away, someone said, "If only we had joined hands sooner."

Amen