

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 6, 2020

I ask your prayers this morning for our country. The upcoming election, in the midst of a rather phenomenal amount of social stress, has peoples fuses shorter than usual. Pray for peace for all parties. Pray for clarity of vision. Pray for the health and welfare of all, whether you agree politically or not. As the return to school continues in various forms, pray for the safety and health of all as some difficult choices are considered and discussed.

Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
And blessed be God's kingdom, now and forever. Amen.

Let's pray this together.

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.

Let us now pray together the collect of the day, found below.

The Collect

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*

First Lesson

Ezekiel 33:7-11

You, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

The Response

Psalm 119:33-40

Legem pone

33 Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, *
and I shall keep it to the end.

34 Give me understanding, and I shall keep your law; *
I shall keep it with all my heart.

35 Make me go in the path of your commandments, *
for that is my desire.

36 Incline my heart to your decrees *
and not to unjust gain.

37 Turn my eyes from watching what is worthless; *
give me life in your ways.

38 Fulfill your promise to your servant, *
which you make to those who fear you.

39 Turn away the reproach which I dread, *
because your judgments are good.

40 Behold, I long for your commandments; *
in your righteousness preserve my life.

The Epistle

Romans 13:8-14

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

The Gospel

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mathew.

Glory to you Lord Christ.

Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus said, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to,

take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Praise to you Lord Christ.

A Reflection

May the words written and the prayer of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

In our current time of concern, worry, and often isolation, the words that seemed to jump off the page from this Gospel are the words offered at the end. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

We are not gathered in church, but this gospel phrase does not say where two or more are gathered in church, does it? It’s a simple phrase offering little more than “where two or three are gathered in my name”. No specific location, no specific number, no real clear guidelines – or are there?

We have the ability to make this as complicated or as simple as we wish. We are offered some of that kind of clarity in today’s reading from Romans when we read “The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Perhaps the lack of guidelines and instructions offered in the Gospel makes it clear enough where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them – period. That’s it. The truth in one simple phrase.

So as Christians and committed disciples of Jesus, whenever two or more of us gather, he is present with us. When we sit together with our family and with our friends, the Lord is there. Maybe we are gathering over Zoom, (something I am doing far too often these days), the Lord is present. When we gather by way of a phone call to a friend, the Lord is present.

As a church, like all churches, we put concern into the number of people in attendance, but we are taught “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them”. There is no minimum and/or maximum number to make this happen – it just is so.

We need to know this in our hearts, especially in a time it is difficult to gather. We need to pay attention and gather in the best way we are able.

With my shelter work, I often wonder about how to acknowledge the Lord among us. This is ecumenical work there, I am not there as a priest, although many of the regulars know that is who I am.

But I do not need to hang that particular banner to know that the Lord is present with us there. We gather in conversation, we gather over cups of coffee, we gather and talk and share stories, sometimes fears and concerns are shared, sometimes we have talked about God. Other times I do much more listening than talking. But in the midst of it all, I can do better when I remember The Lord is among us, and I will offer thanks for that. We may not have gathered specifically in his name, but that's ok, too. I know his name is an important part of what took me there.

So pay attention as you travel and gather. Look for the Lord in your midst, and give thanks when you spot him.

The other important part of this is the two or more parts. The Lord is with you when you are alone, no question. But when there are two or more of us, the sharing brings the Lord closer. Two or more makes it easier to open your hearts to all that is present at that moment.

It's a short reflection today – take the time to gather with those around you. If you are alone today, pick up the phone and reach out, or reach out to someone who may be alone and gather with them.

We will gather as a community again soon, but until we can, gather with those around you. Open your heart to those who may be alone this morning and need to gather and know that Jesus is there among you.

Amen.

Let us now confess our sins against God and our neighbor. Praying together:

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*

Let us end by praying as our Lord Jesus Christ taught us. Pray this as you will, out loud or to yourself – just know that God hears you.

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen.*

We will continue with the prayer of Spiritual Communion. This prayer was written by St. Alphonsus de Liguori. This prayer is now often used when the church is in a place of fasting from Communion, and I have heard this used in many of the on-line services being offered. We will be using this prayer in place of Communion when we regather in the future.

Jesus, I believe that you are truly present in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. I love you above all things, and long for you in my soul. Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. As though you have already come, I embrace you and unite myself entirely to you; never permit me to be separated from you. Amen.

As uncertainty regarding the virus continues to grow, and my on-going desire to keep all of us safe and healthy, I am uncertain when we will be looking at services together again. Remember, pray for patience! I am working on setting up a schedule for folks to stop by and visit at church if they would like a brief time to pray together and receive a blessing as this continues.

In the meantime – be sure to reach out to each other. Call the person you have been meaning to call, and do it today – you can't imagine what a difference it can make. (And, by all means, if you can, print this out and share it with someone from church who may not have computer access – or anyone who you think would find value in it!)

Yours in Christ,
Dave+