



**"Grace in the Gathering"**

**Scripture – Matthew 18:15-20**

**Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**

**Sunday, September 17, 2023**

"People hold on to their politics when they stop attending church."<sup>1</sup>

So begins an article that recently ran in *The Atlantic*. Professor Daniel K. Williams studied what really happens when Americans stop going to church. His findings? When worship attendance *decreases*, polarization *increases*. This outcome might surprise you. It surprised me. As Williams points out, it would be easy to assume that declining church attendance would make communities more secular, more liberal. That's what happened in western Europe. It also happened in New England when Catholics in states like Massachusetts quit going to Mass. But he saw a different trend in the rural regions of the South and the Midwest: declines in church attendance have made those areas "even more Republican and—perhaps most surprising— more stridently Christian nationalist."

Williams explains the phenomenon this way:

"People become even more entrenched in their political views when they stop attending services. Though churches have a reputation in some circles as promoting hyper-politicization, *they can be depolarizing institutions*. Being part of a religious community often forces people to get along with others—including others with different political views—and it may channel people's efforts into charitable work or forms of community outreach that have little to do with politics."

"*Without* a church community," Williams concludes, "the nation's political system becomes their church—and the results are polarizing."

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel K. Williams, "What Really Happens When Americans Stop Going to Church," *The Atlantic* (September 3, 2023).

I have seen this in every community of faith I have called home: The church in suburban St. Louis that nurtured me in the faith. The congregation in Austin, Texas that wrapped me in grace during my student placement. The three communities I've been privileged to serve alongside in 10 years of ministry. Each and every one of these congregations includes Republicans *and* Democrats, and more than a few Independents. But political identity is never the first (or even the fifth!) thing that comes to mind when I recall the saints with whom I've walked on this journey of faith. Instead, I recall the words of John 3:16, which my eighth-grade Sunday school teacher made sure were imprinted upon my heart, or the fireside conversation I had with a youth-group sponsor; I remember working with the committee chair, painting walls to prepare a worn-out building for new ministries. Yes, I might disagree with each of these people on immigration or climate change or what to do about the epidemic of gun violence. But still we care about, and we care *for*, one another. Because — around the font and the table — politics is not the thing that defines us. Here, we are children of God. And we trust that Christ is present in our midst, uniting our hearts even when our minds disagree.

This does not mean the church is perfect. (Shocking, I know!) While the church can be a depolarizing institution, we have our share of disagreements. Whether debates that mirror partisan politics or disputes over the color of the carpet, conflict happens. There are conflicts within every congregation because there are people within every congregation. And wherever people go, conflict follows.

Those who are participating in One Book, One Church know that conflict follows people to the ends of the earth and beyond. In *High Conflict*, journalist Amanda Ripley describes one program that goes to great lengths to select people who can collaborate under extreme duress. NASA's astronaut program screens candidates to ensure they are highly adaptable, socially agreeable, and good at working with others under stress. Once accepted to the program, astronauts receive extensive training in conflict management and communication. And, still, conflict happens. On every single mission. As one NASA spokesperson said, "You can pick a low-drama crew. But not a no-drama crew."<sup>2</sup>

There's no avoiding it. Conflict is inevitable. In every relationship, in every community.

Jesus knew this. Which is why he prepares his disciples to manage conflict. Even before he commissions the church to continue his work, Jesus sets forth practices that will sustain and strengthen this community through every season of its ministry ... including seasons marked by disagreement and dispute.

*If another member of the church sins against you*, Jesus begins. Actually, according to the original Greek, Jesus says, "If a *brother* sins against you ..." The translation we read in worship has chosen "inclusivity over intimacy."<sup>3</sup> While I usually appreciate such choices, we lose something when we drop the word "brother." We lose the sense that the church is a family. We are not just members of a civic organization or a social club. We are siblings in Christ. And the ties that bind us are stronger, more resilient. And, when these ties threaten to snap, it is all the more important to repair the relationship.

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<sup>2</sup> Amanda Ripley, *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 79.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Jacobson, "Commentary on Matthew 18:15-20," [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org).

If a *sibling* sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone, Jesus says. If this sibling doesn't listen, then bring along one or two others. These witnesses — it is important to note — are not there to testify *against* the sibling who has sinned; rather, they are there to testify *to the exchange* ... there to ensure the process is followed because a dispute between two members of the body threatens the health of the whole body.<sup>4</sup> If that still doesn't work, Jesus says, bring the matter before the assembly. And, then — if the sibling *still* refuses to listen — let that person be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector.

Let that person be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector. This is an interesting instruction coming from Jesus ... the One who dines with tax collectors and welcomes Gentiles into the fold. Treating another as a Gentile or a tax collector does *not* mean cutting that person off. It means looking beyond differences and bridging divides to find new ways toward community in Christ.

If we have any doubts about the meaning of this verse, we need only look to the texts flanking this passage for clarity. Just before these instructions, we find Matthew's account of The Parable of the Lost Sheep. You know ... the story of a shepherd who leaves behind 99 sheep to scour the wilderness in search of one that wandered off. *It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost*, Jesus concludes.

And, following today's text, we hear a conversation between Peter and Jesus:

"Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

"Not seven times," Jesus responds, "but ... 77 times."

Jesus is intent on creating a community that cares for one another — that clings to one another — even when conflicts erupt. So, he makes it clear that disciples have a responsibility to one another. If a member of the flock wanders off, go after her! Don't look for an hour and call it quits; your job is to search the wilderness until the lost lamb is brought home! If a sibling makes a mistake, don't cut that person off. Do everything you can to reconcile the relationship! Even these steps for resolving conflict, which — on the surface — seem so performative, point to a deeper commitment. Undergirding this process is concern for the community Christ is calling together — a community that includes Gentiles and Jews, tax collectors and day laborers. In Roman society, you'd never expect these people to get along. But, in the kingdom of heaven, they are one family — brothers, sisters, siblings in Christ. And Christ cares about their relationships with one another.

Jesus knew human relationships are hard work. After all, he was human, too. So, he concludes his instructions with a promise: *Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*. He does not say: Where two or three are *reconciled* in my name, or even where two or three *agree* in my name. He simply says, *Where two or three are gathered* ... Christ is present in the gathering — in the coming together — of the children of God, even of siblings who disagree or who are mired in conflict. Jesus is here, giving us grace to hold fast to one another, even when it seems the most difficult thing in the world to do.

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

Despite the process Jesus sets before us, the church does not always manage conflict well. Sometimes sheep wander off — hurt by a careless comment or a decision with which they disagree — and no one chases after them. Sometimes forgiveness is impossible and relationships are broken beyond repair. Occasionally, after seeking reconciliation, bidding farewell and blessing another on the way is the healthiest and most compassionate choice.

But — when the church is at its best — we can be a community that clings to one another. We can be a community that bridges divides. Because we trust that Christ is present in our midst, uniting our hearts even when our minds disagree.

Let me share a story of what this might look like:

A decade ago, our denomination was mired in conflict over questions of marriage equality and ordination of our LGBTQ siblings. Some congregations had left the denomination; entire flocks wandered off. In the Washington D.C. area, leaders within National Capitol Presbytery wondered if there might be another way. “Instead of talking about gracious *dismissal*, what if we talked about gracious *inclusion*?” they asked.

They started hosting monthly conversations called “Can We Talk?” These dialogues were *not* mediation sessions, nor were they a time to bring disputes before the assembly. But — like the process Jesus sets forth in Matthew — this series was born of a deep concern for the community Christ had called into being. The church was experiencing division, so this Presbytery created a space for faithful people who disagreed on matters of conscience to come together and talk.

Two pastors facilitated these monthly conversations. One, named Jeff, served a congregation in an urban D.C. neighborhood. The other — Don — pastored a congregation on the outskirts of the Presbytery, in a community that had been rural for most of its history. The two did not run in the same circles; they didn’t attend the same conferences. They didn’t have much in common ... or so they thought. But Don and Jeff agreed to facilitate these conversations because they believed in the ties that bind us together as siblings in Christ.

Together, Jeff and Don decided on an approach called “gracious dialogue.” This process requires you to put the best of another person’s argument up against an honest version of your own position. So, in this case, Don — the self-identified Evangelical — could graciously admit that his side tended to care too much about purity of doctrine, and that he admired his progressive friends’ heart for justice. And Jeff — the self-identified Progressive — could affirm the passion with which Evangelicals think about the life of faith and acknowledge that his side could be indifferent to engaging new people with the Gospel.

Anchored by this approach, Don and Jeff gathered a diverse group of faithful people to discuss a variety of topics. The goal was never to change minds. No one in the room was trying to win a debate; everyone there was just trying to understand others more fully. And, though changing others was not the goal,

many found themselves changed through this process. Participants discovered they had a lot more in common than they originally thought. They discovered Christ was in their midst, uniting hearts even when minds disagreed.<sup>5</sup>

Holding fast to one another — despite difference, in the midst of conflict — is not the most exciting thing about the church's witness. It's not the first, or even the fifth, story we'd tell about how we are making a difference in our communities. And, yet, in this era of polarization — when entrenched division leads us not only to dismiss, but to dehumanize our neighbors — our ability to care for one another across difference might be one of the most important things we can offer the world. It's one way we can remind the world that there is grace in the gathering — in coming together, even when we disagree. For where two or three are *gathered* — not reconciled, not united, simply *gathered* — the holy is there among us.

### **Gregory Knox Jones ~ Tender Mercies**

God of grace, who *hears* our sighs and *feels* our suffering, we give thanks for your tender mercies that spur healing when troubles befall us. We are grateful that you give us *strength* when life is bitter. When we lose a job, our confidence crumbles; when we become depressed, darkness engulfs us; when we are hurt by another, our self-image dissolves. Thank you for your tender mercies that infuse us with the necessary tenacity to forge ahead despite the blows.

Loving God, we are grateful that you give us *direction* when our path is unclear. When we face a difficult decision that will impact our entire family, the weight of the decision can muddle our minds; when we encounter a test of our moral principles, we can be tempted to opt for what is expedient rather than what is right; when we are confronted by more needs than we can possibly satisfy, we can be frozen in a state of inaction. Thank you for your tender mercies that whisper to our hearts or speak to us through Scripture or come to us from friends, giving guidance for the way ahead.

Mighty God, we are grateful that you bolster us with *courage* when the future appears foreboding. When the pathology report is dreadful, it can shake us to our core; when a loved one dies, the waves of grief pummel us; when we face a dicey situation, our anxiety can immobilize us. Thank you for your tender mercies that inspire others to stand by our side and generate courage when there is much to fear.

Persistent One, we are grateful for your tender mercies, and we pray that those in need may become aware of your loving kindness. We pray for those who are battling cancer, for those weakened by heart disease or a stroke, for those stricken with Alzheimer's Disease or ALS or Parkinsons, and for all who suffer from an illness that threatens to shorten their lives. We pray for those disturbed in mind and spirit, for those battling an addiction, for those who have been harmed by another and for victims of injustice. We pray for the people of Morocco who lost loved ones in the earthquake and the people of

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<sup>5</sup> Jeff Krehbiel and Don Meeks, "Ignite Presentation," Next Church National Gathering (2016), [nextchurch.net](http://nextchurch.net)

Libya whose family and homes were washed away. We pray for those who are lonely, forgotten, or lost. God, we pray that your tender mercies may bring healing and wholeness to their lives.

And finally, God, we pray that we may be aware of ways that we can become conduits of your tender mercies – instruments of your care and compassion – to those who need to have restored within them: joy and peace and hope.

Now, hear us as we join our voices together and pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying: **“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 debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”**