

TWO OR THREE GATHERED

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2014
First Presbyterian Church of Marianna
Ted W. Land, Interim Pastor

Matthew 18:15-20

“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Matthew 18:20 KJV

A small crowd is sort of an oxymoron, one of those phrases that we use all the time that is contradictory, like jumbo shrimp. Or same difference, or pretty ugly. George Carlin had a list of them several years ago, that included military intelligence, black light, definite maybe, plastic glasses, you know the stuff.

I think I’ve heard preacher types talking about small crowds all my life. They’ll say, after church, “Small crowd this morning.”

There’s no accounting for why people don’t come to church. I’ve heard every excuse you can imagine, every rationalization that can be offered, and short of serious illness, or the cows being out in the road, most of them don’t hold up.

It’s sort of like what Yogi Berra said back in the early days of the New York Mets: “If people aren’t going to come, there’s no way you can keep them away.”

Well, there are times when churches “enjoy” small crowds. Holiday weekends. The Sunday after Easter. The Sunday after Christmas. By the way, those two Sundays are indicated as “low Sundays” on the old calendar of the Episcopal Church, and I’ve always thought the “low” applied to attendance.

But rest assured that wherever two or three are gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ, He will be present with them. As George Buttrick once wrote: “(It is) a true and well loved...spiritual fact: that the real presence of Christ dwells with and empowers faithful corporate prayer and love...The church does not depend on numbers. Two or three, met with Christ, are not merely *added*: they multiply each other’s faith and are multiplied in power by him who is in the midst.” (*Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Volume 7, page 474.*)

There is a saying among the Jews that if two people sit together and there is no word of the Lord between them, they are “sitting in the seat of the scornful” as the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 1:1. But if two sit together, and the word of the Lord is between them, then the Shekina, the presence and glory of the Lord rests upon them. (See Exegesis, *Ibid.*)

One of my favorite contemporary gospel choruses contains the words, “Surely the presence of God is in this place...” That resonates with the words of Jacob in Genesis 28:16, after he had his famous dream of the ladder going up to heaven: “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.”

The presence and the glory of the Lord is often experienced in big crowds, like the multitude that were gathered to hear Jesus when He preached the Sermon on the Mount, or those who were gathered to hear Him when He fed the five thousand.

In the last half of the twentieth century, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association brought those big crowds together, and as hundreds of thousands gathered, thousands made decisions for Christ.

But in the twenty-first century, the Graham organization has changed its focus: part of that is because Dr. Graham is too old, too feeble, to preach the kind of sermons, to lead the kind of services, he once did, and there is no one else in the organization that can command the respect and the attention that Billy Graham did. But part of that is that the mass evangelism, the televised evangelism, doesn't appeal in the 21st century as they did fifty or forty or thirty years ago. Instead, the Graham organization is focusing on personal evangelism, the kind of thing that happens in small groups or one on one. And in one on one evangelism, or following the example of Jesus, sending out teams two by two, we once again find the small crowd of two or three gathered in His name.

I don't know that any sermon I've ever preached has caused someone to make a decision to follow Jesus. I hope some have. The people that I've led to Christ, well, it has been one on one, or two on two, with Jesus making His presence felt in our midst. .

One of the theological arguments that often divides churches has to do with the presence of Jesus Christ in the elements of the Lord's Supper.

The Roman Catholic Church ascribes to the doctrine of transubstantiation, which says that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ.

The Lutherans have a doctrine of consubstantiation, which is about half=way between the Roman Catholic doctrine, and our belief that the bread is bread and the wine is wine (or in the case of most Presbyterian Churches, grape juice), but that Jesus is present, symbolized by the bread and the cup.

There are times when I feel Christ's presence closer than at other times. When I stand at the table to serve the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is one of those times, when the Body of Christ is gathered together to share the Body of Christ broken for our sins and the blood of Christ shed to wash those sins away.

But when one of our elders goes with me, and we serve communion to one of the saints of the church who is hospitalized or homebound, I feel Christ's presence there as well, abiding with us as two or three are gathered in His name.

May we put our hearts and souls and minds together, to bring the presence and the glory and the power of the Lord to bear on the world in which we live.

Let us pray.

Forgive us when we forget that the greatest power we have is the power of prayer. Help us in twos and threes, in small crowds and large gatherings, in the quiet places of our hearts and homes, to seek not only your wisdom and guidance, but your power and glory, in your precious name Jesus we pray.
Amen.