

A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on September 6, 2020 (Proper 18A)

“For when two or three are gathered in my name,” Jesus says, “I am there among them.” I love that line, which comes from this passage in Matthew’s gospel and is embedded in the Prayer of St. John Chrysostom, which we often recite at Morning Prayer: “You have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his name, you will be in the midst of them.”

It’s especially poignant when literally just two or three are gathered together in prayer. A reminder that Jesus is present with us no matter the size of the congregation, no matter where we are, no matter how we gather.

Now, I know that this pandemic and the resulting quarantine have been particularly difficult for those who live alone. Feelings of isolation and loneliness have been almost unbearable for many. Depression is on the rise and the mental health challenges are real. We are social beings built for interaction with others, and when those interactions are limited, there are consequences. I knew things were really getting bad this spring when even the introverts among us started craving cocktail party-style small talk.

But also, think about the disciples. Jesus didn’t call them into isolation, but into a community of followers. And that was no accident. We need one another to encourage us and challenge us and inspire us. We are stronger together as a community of faith than we are as individuals seeking to follow Jesus.

But for those of us who live with others during this time, the whole notion of two or three gathered together has gotten old. If you live in a household with two or three or four or five others, this has not been an easy time. There is definitely such a thing as too much together time. We all know one another’s buttons and we often find ourselves either pushing them or having our own buttons pushed to the point that we all crave some isolation. As much as we love our families, two or three gathered together, in the same space for months on end, has its challenges. And as the weather gets colder and another COVID spike sets in and everyone’s trapped inside on Zoom calls, the walls will once again start to cave in.

The reality is that when two or three are gathered together, conflict inevitably arises. That’s just the nature of the human condition. Whether it’s family or work or school or a faith community, conflict happens. Look no further than Thanksgiving with your extended family or a board meeting or even a church committee. People’s own life experiences and passions and opinions often come into conflict with one another. Now, this can be exciting and energizing and life-giving. The back and forth exchange of ideas in a mutually respectful way adds spice to our lives. But it can also be divisive and destructive.

When I was in New York I got to know an older and, frankly, wiser priest in the neighboring town. We used to regularly run together training for marathons along the trails of Rockefeller State Park. We’d talk about all sorts of things as we logged those miles, but when it came to church conflict, which was often a topic of conversation, he’d say the root of it was always the same thing. “You gotta ask the question: are people talking *to* one another or *about* one another?”

And that’s exactly what Jesus is getting at here. “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” In other words, if you come into conflict with someone, talk to the person! Rather than complaining about them to someone else, go directly to the source. More often than not, if you speak to someone in good faith, and they respond in good faith, you can work it out. Even if it’s the old agree to disagree thing.

But what's your first response when it comes to conflict? Be honest. Do you have the uncomfortable conversation or do you let things fester? Do you speak with the person with whom you disagree or do you gossip about it with a friend? Do you confront the issue head on or do you post something passive aggressive on Facebook?

If you're like me, well...it depends. The better version of myself leans into difficult conversations by picking up the phone and addressing the matter directly. The other version sits and stew. And I'm really good at that. Now, I don't think Jesus' main point here is to offer a lesson on conflict avoidance. But bringing difficult things into the light is a critical component to living an authentic life of faith. Whether that's sin or injustice or anything that tears down rather than lifts up our fellow children of God.

Jesus is all about the hard conversation. Never does he play the game of going along to get along. He doesn't excuse bad behavior for the sake of social graces. If you made a vaguely racist joke during a dinner party with Jesus sitting at the table, he would stop everything to call it out. Now that's not always going to win him any friends. I'm pretty sure he was never invited back to certain people's houses. Truth telling is hard. It doesn't make you popular, especially when that truth disrupts the privilege of those in power. Ultimately, it led Jesus to the cross. But when it came to sharing the good news of salvation for all people, when it came to lifting up the powerless and the vulnerable, Jesus made no compromises. And he paid for this with his life.

It's safe to say that there is a lot of emotion floating around this fall. We're in the midst of perhaps the most politically divisive era in our lifetime; we're two months away from a presidential election with passions raging on both sides; this pandemic has been politicized to the point that basic public health measures like mask wearing have become controversial; the uncertainty of the school situation is pitting neighbor against neighbor and friend against friend as people disagree on whether to hold in-person classes or focus on remote learning; the inability to see friends and loved ones is affecting our collective mental health; depression, alcoholism, and domestic violence are on the rise; the frustration at not being able to worship in person, even as some other congregations are doing so is boiling over; the grief at not having things back to normal is stressing everyone out.

All of which is to say that we are not always functioning at our best right now. We are not always being gracious in our interactions with others. Intentionally or not, we sometimes tear others down rather than building them up. Every interaction these days feels particularly charged, and I invite you to simply be aware of this. No one is fully happy with the way things are going right now, and this plays out in different ways for different people.

I'm not big on quoting Facebook memes in my sermons, but as one popular one puts it, "Be kind. For everyone is fighting a battle you know nothing about." This is true. As is the fact that Jesus is present with us in all our interactions. Which is why we do well to remember that when two or three are gathered together, Jesus is in the midst of us.