

*"Ekklesia"*  
*A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr*  
*First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – September 10, 2023*

**PLEASE READ:**  
**Romans 13:8-10**  
**Matthew 18:15-20**

The English language has some wonderful assortment of nouns for various groups of animals: We say a *herd* of cows, a *flock* of sheep, a *school* of fish, a *gaggle* of geese and a *pride* of lions. However, less widely known is a *murder* of crows (as well as for rooks and ravens), an *exaltation* of doves and, presumably because they look so wise, a *parliament* of owls. The funniest thing I've heard in a long time is what you call a group of Baboons. They are the loudest, most dangerous, most obnoxious, most viciously aggressive and least intelligent of all primates. And what is the proper collective noun for a group of baboons? A *Congress*!

But seriously, what do you call a group of Christians? And why? As we rally after summer holidays, what are we really about and what should we be called? Our gospel text is the second place in the New Testament where the term *church* is used as a way to describe the Christian community (the first was in chapter 16:18 when Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my church."). The term translated "church" is the Greek word "ekklesia." It literally means "[ones] called out." The apostle Paul uses "body" language. We are the "body of Christ." Each one of us are members of the same body, we read in Ephesians 4 or Romans 12 or I Corinthians 12... Or Peter in his first letter says that we are a spiritual house, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. God's own people..." I like the language that we are to be *dispensers of grace*.<sup>1</sup> More confessional language is that we are "the communion of saints." We say in the apostles' creed: "I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic ("universal") church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins..." etc...

As noted by Gallup Pollsters, the church is in serious decline. For the first time in our country's history, a majority of adults say they are not affiliated with any kind of religious community.<sup>2</sup> It's a good time to reflect on who we are called to be. It's interesting that "called out" is currently used to talk about giving special attention. The church has sometimes misunderstood our being called out to mean called *away*. Rather, we are called "out" to be more present in the larger society. Salt and Light. We are called "out" to be engaged and actively participating in public spaces like education, government, finance, industry and science. Whatever the context, we are called by God to be a loving and welcoming community! We are not a *bounded* set community but a *center* set community. We become the community God calls us to

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 213.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholask Kristof, "Americans Are Losing Their Religious Faith" (*The New York Times*, Aug. 24, 2023), A17.

be *not* when we draw lines of rules to delineate who's in and who's out, but rather as we lift up Jesus as the center of our life together and welcome all in his name.

But of course, that means we must listen to what Jesus has to say to us. Matthew 18 gets at the heart of the gospel, the foundation of Christian community. If you go back and read the whole chapter, it points us to the ministry of reconciliation that is at the core of Christ' ministry. It was Christ who came and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, to reconcile us back to God. He did this primarily not through what he *said* but by what he *did*. Paul writes that "in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself (II Cor. 5:19). And basic to the ministry of reconciliation is *forgiveness*.

Forgiveness becomes possible because of the Cross. On the Cross Christ did for us that which we could not do for ourselves. He took upon himself the sins of the world, allowing us to claim and proclaim God's forgiveness for all. Karl Barth writes, "When the pardon of God is received it enables us to forgive...Let us have toward others this small impulse of forgiveness, of freedom." Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., writes, "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. [Whoever] is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love."

This is easier said than done, of course. That's why one of the names for the people of God was first given as *Israel*, which means literally, "struggles with God." As the communion of saints, we are hardly perfect saints, working out our salvation with fear and trembling. Life is complicated and easy answers never satisfy. I like what H.L. Mencken once said, "For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong!"<sup>3</sup> We all need to recognize that in any community, people are going to be in different places in life, with different perspectives theologically and biblically. We will very likely misunderstand and offend one another, so it is key to learn to forgive. We talk about loving our neighbors, but until we forgive, we cannot love.

This is all important background, but our gospel text this morning is really about how to confront one another when we have sinned against one another! Our text this morning is really about *how to speak the truth in love*. Outlined here is a process for accountability when someone has wronged you. Notice, Christian community is not conflict-free community. Just like brothers and sisters in any family, siblings in Christ will not only err, but sin. We will hurt one another, transgress against each

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York:HarperOne, 2011), 59.

other, offend one another... Such is community life. I like the prayer of the little English girl, "O God, make the bad people gooder, and the good people nicer."<sup>4</sup>

We need to remember that when we experience brokenness at church, we are called to go through a process that works toward reconciliation, the first step is letting our brother or sister know that we have been offended. If they agree and ask forgiveness, we are to forgive them. But if they don't agree or acknowledge the offense, then we are commanded to open the discussion and increase the level of accountability. This is a good principle in any relationship. Deal with people one on one; face to face. If you are still treated unfairly, then involve others. The idea is that even a small conflict can become a community issue if it is not dealt with honestly and fairly.

Again, this all sounds easy enough, but why is it that even in the church we have a hard time with this? Why is it that one of the most common names for Christians outside of the church is "hypocrite"? I think at least part of the problem is rooted in our *misunderstanding of* and *lack of belief in* the gospel. We are justified (made right before God) by *grace*, but do we believe it? Most of us believe that we are justified by how well we do things, and how much of life together we get right. If you find it hard to confront someone or hear someone's critique, you are probably basing your sense of being OK not on grace, but on the law. If you cringe or get angry at people who would criticize you or confront you with your errors, you are probably living with a rather legalistic framework of faith.

Now, I don't think any of us like to give or hear criticism or be confronted with a rebuke or correction, but if we are confident that we are justified not by our own righteousness but by Christ's righteousness (what Luther called an "alien righteousness" freely given to us), then we are free to hear and accept a brother or sister speaking the truth in love. My life as a leader changed when someone suggested to me that critique is simply free consulting. Be a learning leader and listen. Even harsh critique can have a grain of truth, and I believe that we can all learn from one another. If my security is in Christ, then I can listen to and receive just about anything from anyone else...

The bottom line is that our world needs civil people who know how to exchange ideas without defensiveness or violence. Our life together is not supposed to be the ridiculous fighting and bickering of a congress of baboons. We are to be turning the world upside down by radical acts of compassion and mercy, showing deference to

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1997), 32.

one another, considering others as better than ourselves and showing favor to the outsiders, the weak and poor in our midst.

As we are gathering for Rally Day, I know that we have a lot of fun stuff planned, but it's really not about the hot dogs, balloons and the bouncy house. It's not even about the bluegrass, as wonderful as that is... We rally to remember who we are and who is in our midst. Jesus once said, "When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Amazing, really!

One more thought... Kim and I have been enjoying the US Open. I am so impressed with Coco Gauff, who beat Aryna Sabalenka yesterday to be the US Open women's singles champion. She is an amazing 19-year-old... after watching her win her semi-final match, I read an article about how Coco watches anime shows to prepare and cool down for her matches. Anime is Japanese cartoons. The one she likes is *My Hero Academia*. It's about a world where everyone has a superpower, except for the hero Izuku. He longs to have a superpower and go to school to learn how to become part of the next generation of superheroes.

Can you see where a preacher might go with this? I don't know, but apparently one of Coco's super-powers is prayer. I've never seen a champion get down on her knees at Arthur Ashe and pray after winning. I would hope that our church is a community where you can learn about your superpowers and how to become part of the next generations of superheroes, whether here in New Canaan, or in Fairfield County, or anywhere in the world.

As broken as we may be, the church is still God's preferred instrument to change the world for all that is good, true and beautiful, for all that is just and righteous. God has even called us friends and calls us out to share the greatest superpower in the world for all people. Forgiveness. Love. Grace. So, friends, let's rally to love one another. Let's rally to share the love of Christ with all people, regardless of whether they are a herd, a flock, a gaggle, or even a congress!

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.*