

“You Are Family”
Matthew 18:1-20
September 10, 2017

As people in Texas and Louisiana go through the recovery process from the devastation caused by Hurricane Harvey and as people in Florida endure the destructive power of Hurricane Irma today, I’m sure we will be inundated with stories and interviews of people who survived these storms, who are involved in the recovery efforts, and who maybe even lost loved ones. I’m sure we will also hear from government officials and reporters telling us how in the midst of disaster they witnessed people all over our country coming together to care for one another in ways they had never seen before.

But this is nothing new. We’ve seen this take place in our country in the past during other disasters and even the Bible tells us that about 2000 years ago in the city of Antioch, located 300 miles north of Jerusalem, a group of Christians took up a collection of money to be sent to the people of Jerusalem in order to provide care and relief from a famine that was about to take place. Obviously the people in those days did not have the weather forecasting technology to see if a famine was coming. Instead, a prophet named Agabus prophesied that famine was going to strike the entire Roman world. And followers of Jesus believed him and set up the first “famine relief fund.”

This unusual event received some mixed reviews in the local area at the time. Some of the leaders in Antioch did not believe that money should be sent outside of the community. They said that there were people in the community who needed help. These leaders did not understand why people would show such concern for others they did not even know, in a city located 300 miles away. But the Christians in the area understood that they were all brothers and sisters in Christ. Even though they may not know each other, their faith connected them to each other and made them responsible for one another as a family.

Hurricane Harvey caused record flooding as it knocked out power and destroyed roads and homes. The cost of the devastation in some areas is being likened to that caused by Hurricane Katrina, which struck the Gulf Coast of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama on about the same day 12 years ago. As our nation recovers from these kinds of disasters, including the terrorist attacks of 2001, it’s important to remember some simple yet powerful words that Jesus spoke at the end of our Gospel lesson for today. In Matthew 18:20, Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Just think about that. When a family bows their heads to give thanks at the dinner table, Jesus is there. When you pray with someone who is sick, Jesus is there. When storms destroy our communities and we Christians come together, Jesus is there. You want to know where to find Jesus? Get together with someone else who is a Christians for the purpose of prayer, or studying His Word, or comforting those who are hurting, and Jesus will be there – guaranteed! We are not alone.

As you see the pictures and read the stories of people who are trying to recover from the recent storms, think about the reasons we are concerned about the people in those devastated areas. Some of us may have lived there. Some of us may have family or friends there. Some of us may have experienced such disasters. The one reason why I would like all of us to see that we are a part of the events that have happened in those areas of destruction is that many of those who have suffered or are suffering are our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are part of our spiritual family.

Our fellow Christians around the world, and more specifically, the people sitting around you today are your brothers and sisters in Christ. I know last fall when Hurricane Matthew came through our area, many of you were quick to check on each other. In fact, when disasters hit I think Christians are pretty good at caring for those around them during those difficult moments. We check on each other, we make financial donations, we are quick to volunteer to get our hands dirty to help others, and many denominations have their own Relief or Human Care organizations designed to provide immediate assistance to those in need. But what about days like today? It is beautiful outside today and it appears that Hurricane Irma is going to miss us. So as you go through your day, will you still view the people sitting around you as members of your family? Are you just as concerned about the people sitting around you in worship today as you would be if Hurricane Irma had come through our area and you didn’t see those people? Will you always be willing to care for those sitting here today, work with them, and even forgive them in the ordinary, routine things we do? We should, because as members of a spiritual family we are accountable to each other at all times, not just when disasters strike.

God describes the Church in the book of Ephesians telling us that we are “the body of Christ, where we work together to build up the body, each doing our part as we speak the truth in love to each other.” We are not joined together under just a name. We are joined together in a common faith. We confess that we are sinners from birth, who have been saved by the blood of Jesus – who comes to us in His Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and Communion. The entire Christian life is to be one of repentance in which we are saved by God’s grace. This is the inner conviction that is to unite us and bind us in a common fight against Satan and our sinful flesh.

In other words, visualize it as a war, that we fight together in which no one is to be left behind. But sometimes people do things that are sinful, which leads them to stray away from the family of believers. Other times, we may say or do things that can be hurtful, which may cause people to want to separate themselves from the family.

When people join a church, should they expect to find a place or a community where everyone gets along perfectly? No. Just as family members often have differences, church families have differences. However, the Church was meant to be different from the rest of society. There is no other organization in the world like the Church, that is designed to not only bring physical, emotional, and mental assistance and healing, but it is also designed to bring spiritual assistance, healing, and strength. In other words, the Church was meant to be a community of reconciliation, and Jesus gives us a very simple process to follow when it comes to resolving conflict in the church in our Gospel lesson today. And like many things in life, if we would simply follow the directions, we would save ourselves a lot of heartache and frustration. This process begins by setting up a private conversation to address the issues. In particular, our text says that the one who has been hurt, the one who has been wronged, they are the one who must take the initiative to go and talk to the other person. Now this is not easy, and sometimes when another person doesn’t see the sin that they may have committed, he or she may get angry and start making counter accusations of us being unloving, uncaring, or hypocritical.

So if the first visit fails, Jesus instructs us to go with one or two other people to talk to the individual. Why? Because going back shows that we are seriously concerned, and the others who come along not only serve as witnesses, but they also come to help us to better listen to each other. Reconciliation is a process. It is not something we do all at once, it’s usually not easy, and it may take a long time, just like the restoration process of a community after a natural disaster.

Helping each other in the midst of a disaster may seem like an overwhelming challenge, but time and again our communities have recovered. Confronting someone over sin or a misunderstanding is small compared to a natural disaster, but the task of recovery and restoration, oddly enough, can be much more difficult and may take even longer. However, when we follow God’s restoration process, we will indeed discover the incredible healing power of the presence of God. Just imagine what a wonderful world this would be if we had the same humility and passion to restore relationships in our family devastated by sin, as we do to restore communities devastated by storms.