

Gaines Congregational United Church of Christ, Sept 10, 2023

Ezekiel 33:7-11

Psalms 119:33-40

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

Sermon Title:

The Family Spirit

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

The first part of the lectionary selection for today from Matthew's gospel is one of the most difficult in the gospel records, and its difficulty lies in the fact that it does not ring true; it does not sound at all like Jesus; it sounds much more like the regulations of a local church administrative committee.

We can go further than that. It is simply not possible that Jesus said this in its present form. Jesus couldn't have told his disciples to take disputes to the church, because the church didn't exist; and the passage implies a fully developed and organized Church with a system of ecclesiastical discipline.

What's more, and what's worse, is that it speaks of tax collectors and Gentiles as irredeemable outsiders. Yet Jesus was often accused of being the friend of tax-collectors and sinners; he never spoke of them as hopeless outsiders, but always with sympathy and love, and in the case of Gentiles, often with praise, crediting to them greater faith than any he had ever found among the Jews.

For that reason among others, what we have here in these opening verses, at least as they stand, could not have been spoken by Jesus, but were almost certainly added by Matthew by the author of Matthew's gospel to give divine credence, so to say, to such administrative procedures as did in fact exist in the early Christian

Church, which did already exist with officers and committees by the time the Gospel was written, decades after the death of Jesus.

So we're not going to dwell on this opening part of the lectionary reading for today, but instead focus on the second part of the selection. But here we also find a different sort of problem. The selection consists of two things which Jesus undoubtedly did say, but the problem here is that what Jesus is recorded as saying is said so tersely, that they must almost certainly have been part of some longer reflection. Let me first reread these verses:

[Matthew 18: VV. 19-20].

Consider the first, that if two upon earth agree on any matter for which they are praying, they will receive it from God. The problem is pretty obvious. If it were to be taken literally, and without any qualification, it is manifestly untrue. Times without number, devout Christians have gathered together to pray for the physical or spiritual welfare of a loved one – and the prayer has not, in the literal sense, been answered. Times without number over the centuries, devout Christians have agreed to pray for the conversion of their own land or the conversion of the heathen or the coming of the Kingdom, and even yet after two thousand years, many such prayers have not been answered. People regularly pray – and pray sincerely and even desperately – and do not receive that for which they pray.

So we must begin with the assumption that Jesus was not offering something like a magical formula for getting whatever you're praying for: simply find someone else to pray for the same thing, and, presto, your prayer is answered.

What then was Jesus teaching us about prayer?

I think at least part of an answer can be found by thinking about the second of the two sayings contained in our selection: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them."

What does that mean, to be gathered together in prayer *in His name*?

Surely what it means is that our communal prayers, to be pleasing to God, must be offered in the same Spirit in which Christ himself prayed. And what was that Spirit? It's the spirit of love. The very last instruction that Jesus gave to his disciples, as a group, was this: "Love one another, as I have loved you."

And so I think we can safely say that the teaching Jesus must have been offering when he said these things that Matthew reproduced in his Gospel had to do with the sort of spirit he wants to see among His followers when they pray and, by implication, the sort of thing God wants to see. What God and Jesus are looking for is the spirit of communal love.

But what does that entail? What does Christ's own loving spirit look like, when translated into the body of his followers, especially when they are engaged in prayer?

Obviously a great many things, but this morning, I'd like to focus on two things.

First and foremost, it means that prayer must never be selfish, that selfish prayer cannot find an answer. We are not meant to pray only for our own needs, thinking of nothing and no one but ourselves.

In BS a while back, I mentioned a report I read somewhere that academics had done a study to determine what is the most commonly uttered prayer in the United States. Is it the Lord's Prayer? No. It's the prayer to win the lottery.

But of course, that's exactly the kind of prayer that is completely selfish, completely unmindful of others, because for you to win the lottery it is necessary for all others to lose, to have wasted their money. It's hard to imagine a prayer that's less filled with the mutual love that Christ is looking for in his followers, especially when they pray.

And I think it's safe to generalize that point, and say that any prayer that seeks the advancement of our own interests or wellbeing at the expense of the interests or wellbeing of someone else, of another child of God, is unlikely to win God's approval.

And that leads directly to the second thought I'd like to share. The final remark that Matthew quotes is Jesus saying this: Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them.

One of the earliest interpretations of this was that the two or three Jesus specifies represent the mother, the father, and the child. Or in other words, that wherever the 'family' spirit is present in prayer, Jesus and God are comfortable there and especially attentive.

But why would the idea of the family have been especially present in Jesus' mind as he offered this instruction?

I think it's because, of all the manifestations of love we find in the world around us, that which manifests in the family is special.

The old saying goes that the parent gives birth to the child, and the child gives birth to the parent, and the truth of that old saying points to the fact that entering into parenthood is necessarily leaving another condition of life behind, sacrificing it, if you will. A new parent is created as well as a new child; a parent is born anew just as surely as the child.

And in parenthood, one's self-centeredness becomes a thing of the past. Once having taken the responsibility of bringing another human being into existence, from that time on a whole new set of variables must enter into every calculation of what to do next, what plans to make for tomorrow, how to pattern one's own life to accommodate this other center of consciousness that's now a part of that life. Spending time and effort and money on the child now becomes as natural and important as spending it on oneself used to be.

That special love, that special state of relation, that we find in families, is the spirit that Jesus wants his followers to incorporate in themselves, with respect to all, but particularly with respect to the members of His body, the church, to those who gather to worship and pray together..

It's worth mentioning in this context that, from its very earliest years, the members of the Christian church, even before it was called Christianity, always referred to each other as brothers and sisters. No other religion does or has ever done that. At the very foundation of our communal faith is the ideal of manifesting to each other the same charity, the same forgiveness, the same generosity, the same concern, the same sense of eternal connection, that comes so naturally to us in our own families.

And I'll close by mentioning something that I'd wager has occurred to many of you here today as you listen to these reflections. In Luke's gospel, when the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, Jesus doesn't say, *When you pray, say My*

Father, who are in heaven. He says, When you – when my followers – pray, Say, *Our Father*.

At the very foundation of our prayer life, whether in private or community, we have Christ's encouragement that we pray, not as isolated individuals, but with an awareness of ourselves as being in full and eternal familial bond with each other, and with all of God's children.

And so our prayer for this morning, Our Father, who art in heaven, is that you nourish within each of us the sense of kinship with all those with whom we have to do, but especially with those gathered here this morning, in your house in Gaines, the house we share with each other and with Jesus, our Lord, our savior, and our brother, in whose own name and spirit we pray.