

**“Critical Mass”**

**Fifth Sunday of Lent**

**Matthew 18:15-20**

**March 27, 2020**

**Pastor Andy Kinsey**

*“Wherever two or three are gathered together...”*

- **Matthew 18:20**

**Prayer of Preparation**

O Lord, open our hearts and stimulate our minds by the presence of your Spirit: speak to us your Word in Christ: Amen.

**Message**

Before I begin to share a few words, I thought I would communicate a vision I had the other day. Many of you told us that you had watched the service last week in your pajamas with a cup of coffee. That’s great! I am so glad we have the opportunity to share in this way.

However, on the first weekend we are back, whenever that will be, I had the vision that many of you would come to worship in pajamas with coffee in hand!

It is a crazy vision I know: One big pajama party! But wherever you are now, and whatever you have in your hand, or whatever you are wearing – please know we are glad you are with us. I simply ask that you not get too comfortable, not simply during the rest of our time together this morning, but, as we have shared on other occasions, for the long haul. We will need to find creative but intentional ways of carrying out our ministry in the days ahead.

To be sure, we will do so via technology, but we will also need to remember how we minister to others the “old fashion way” via phone calls, emails, letters, cards, notes.

In this way, the month of April will not only bring spring showers, but faithful ways of caring for one another on the one hand while being a faithful

presence in this community on the other. Probably in ways that we had not anticipated!

So keep connecting with people you know. Simply call them. Write them. This is a time of seed-planting; it is a time of creativity.

### **Sermon Series**

I make that comment with the whole notion of God's providence in mind: I don't think we could have picked a more appropriate passage several months ago for our sermon series on the purpose and identity of our congregation than the one I just read to you from Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus' words of "where two or three gather together" could not be more important during this time of social distancing, when we are not to gather in large groups. That is to say, Jesus' words here are very helpful at a time like this, to remember how we as followers of Christ are part of a *micro-church movement*, where persons gather in his name and hold each other accountable, forgiving each other and being reconciled.

Perhaps you may have heard of mega-churches, where more than a thousand people gather to worship; well, here, in this passage, Jesus has a vision of a micro-church, where only takes two or three persons gather to make a kingdom difference.

Typically, of course, we gather face-to-face. We can touch and see one another. But now we gather online, perhaps via Zoom, or Google Hangout, or Facebook. Or perhaps we are connecting to our loved-ones and friends online, or as we are doing as church, now coming through the internet.

Think of how Jake and Angela are utilizing different social media platforms to stay connected. Or think of how Amber Whitman is using Facebook to share with the children of our preschool. These small gatherings and connections online will have a ripple-effect.

I know that it was good last week for Peggy and me to gather online with all our kids through Google Hangout. It was a way for us to connect.

But consider for a moment your own circle of influence of family and friends during this time: with whom are you connecting? Remember: if there is a

name that comes to your mind, find a way to connect: You don't need committee approval.

### **Jesus' Idea of Critical Mass**

After all, it only takes a *critical mass* of people to bring about the kind of change that we seek to bring about.

By critical mass here, I mean what many in physics call a chain reaction, or what happens when the atom splits, to begin a bigger "chain reaction," or with respect to group dynamics when a certain number of people can produce a particular result; there is a *critical mass* to bring about the change.

Think of what we are hearing about how we all need to do our part to "flatten the curve." It is going to take a *critical mass* to flatten the outbreak of Covid-19, so that the healthcare system in this country can function in a way that treats persons who have the virus. Without a critical mass of persons to help in this effort, the curve will spike in a way that puts more and more people at risk. A critical mass is necessary, and, in this case, it needs to be big!

How odd it may sound, then, to consider what Jesus is saying about critical mass: What constitutes a critical mass in Jesus' mind is this principle of "wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst" (18:20).

Two or three people! Don't we need more? Perhaps a big bureaucracy? Another committee? A long-range plan? More church consultants? Jesus' idea of a critical mass is when two or three people gather together, invoking his presence and then moving with the Spirit in mission.

Note the part about Christ's presence: without Christ's presence, we could gather with ten-thousand people and it wouldn't matter. We could even have layers upon layers of organization and nothing could happen. For example, think of how we so easily lay bureaucracy upon more bureaucracy, or how we duplicate and create more organization than we need to create, making it more difficult.

This is why we need to understand partnerships and networks. If one group can do the work, then great: let's help them. Or if another group can do something

special, great! Then let's help them. After all, in Jesus' way of operating, it only takes two or three people to make an impact in the wider community anyway!

I sometimes think we have forgotten Jesus' instruction here that there are occasions when smaller is better: remember that Jesus only picked twelve people at first. He then added women and another seventy. It was a critical mass.

Remember the early church following Pentecost started small groups (Acts 2:42-45) and then met in homes (Acts 20:20). The Methodist Movement started small by meeting in bands and classes and erecting small chapels and food pantries and clinics, not cathedrals.

These examples remind us that Jesus had a micro-vision of God's kingdom, where every person, every small group, has a role to play, in the ministry of the body of Christ.

### **Jesus' Original Concern**

And yet, I wonder sometimes if we have made it too difficult, and what I mean by that is understanding Jesus' original concern here: yes, we have created huge organizations to carry out Jesus' mission; and there are all kinds of agencies and churches doing great work. And that's wonderful.

And yet, we need to consider that Jesus' instructions are really about reconciliation and forgiveness: that if we have problems in a relationship, or if we need to address a matter, we need to do so in a way that is simple by going to persons directly. And then if that doesn't work, we gather other witnesses; and when we do *that*, we pray for Christ's presence.

This is what is to take place for the health and wellbeing of the community, so that the virus of alienation and despair won't spread.

It is truly an amazing teaching: to be a *Matthew 18 Christian* is to be a person whose actions are geared toward reconciliation and forgiveness and building up the work of the whole body.

But more: Jesus' words also remind us of something so much deeper: that when we speak of God's presence *with* us, or Christ's work *for* us, or the Spirit's activity *in* us – we need to understand also how Christ is *between* us.

Between us! Among us. Yes, Christ is with us and for us and in us, but even when we are apart Christ is between us, in how we act together.

And not just Grace Church, but with all those who are working to combat this virus – in our hospitals and healthcare facilities, in our schools (as David Clendening shared), in our places of work, in assisted living facilities, in other congregations, in our government. There is a *critical mass* working together.

How may we serve as part of that critical mass, knowing how it goes together, with two or three gathered here, and two or three gathered there?

No matter where we are, no matter who we are, God is not only with us, but also between us, no matter the distance.

### **Closing Invitation**

This week I had the funeral of a member of this church: Lorene Harrell. Lorene and Wally Harrell joined this congregation about five years ago, and they have been wonderful members.

On Wednesday, we celebrated Lorene's life. To say the least, it was different; it was small, with less than eight people. It was a group that practiced social distancing, with all of us scattered throughout the funeral home. We did not touch each other. I have not presided over such a gathering.

And yet, Christ was with us, if not between us; Christ was for us, if not among us, just as Christ had been with Lorene throughout her life.

As we gathered, we affirmed *that promise* despite our circumstances; and we affirmed *Christ's presence*, regardless the situation. Just as the saints have been doing since day one of the church; just as we are seeking to do now – critical mass and all!

Amen.