

## **September 10, 2017 – Where Two or Three**

### **Matthew 18:15-20**

The first thing I want to say is that this week's scripture reading is short but challenging. At our Wednesday morning bible study there were several verses that we struggled with. One verse that we questioned was the one near the end where Jesus promised that if two people prayed for the same thing that God would grant their wish. Really?! ... I don't think so. For example, I can tell you that when my youngest brother was born there were four sisters praying for another girl and only three brothers praying for a boy and there's no way God could have answered both our prayers. Did Jesus really believe that it only takes two?

And then there's the verse where Jesus said, "If he or she ignores even the church, then treat that sister or brother as you would a Gentile or a tax collector." You see Gentiles (non-Jews) and tax collectors were shunned by the Jewish community of his day. But we all know that Jesus didn't shun people; we can find stories where he shared meals with Gentiles and tax collectors. So we could ask, "What was Jesus trying to say?" or "Did Jesus even say this?" It would be easy to decide, "Well Jesus obviously didn't say these things so let's just ignore this reading."

But you know what... that would be too easy. Instead I want to invite you to listen to how Ralph Milton interprets this reading in his Lectionary Story Bible. He calls

this particular story “How to Fix a Problem.” (*Read story from the Lectionary Story Bible Year A, page 200*)

Ralph Milton figured out that this scripture is really about community. It's about honest-to-goodness, authentic Christian community. And the two things that are true about community is 1) we all say we want it and 2) we usually have no idea how difficult it is to come by. On this Welcome Back Sunday it would be easy to idealize community and make it sound like it's simple to live and work and pray together in harmony. But it's not. There are always disagreements that happen, issues that need to be worked out, and feelings that get hurt.

You see the really difficult thing about community is that it's made up of people! And people can be difficult, challenging, selfish, and unreliable. That's just part of our nature. So in this scripture passage the author of the gospel of Matthew has Jesus telling us what to do when someone messes up in community. And Ralph Milton does a great job of illustrating how this can work in real life. There's nothing in Ralph's story about shunning people or about miraculous responses to prayer. He's just describing how repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation in community is possible.

The key, of course, is love. We know that God's love is unconditional, merciful and everlasting. And we know that “Where two or three are gathered” God is there. We know that God, who is the essence of love, is here. And we are called

to live in God's love and to grow that love within ourselves. We are called to share God's love with the people in our church, our community and our world.