



“Held Together”

A service sheet to guide reflections on and around Sunday 6th
September 2020

Introduction

Welcome to worship as we continue with our exploration of Matthew’s Gospel. This week we will be learning about community relationships and how God can be found where people unite in the name of Jesus. If you are reading this, it probably means you have not been able to join us in our building or on Zoom for a shared service. Please know you are still united with us as a valued and loved part of Christchurch.

Hymn

Be still, for the presence of the Lord – Singing the Faith 20

Wherever we are, together or apart, we can open our hearts to God

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 Be still,
for the presence of the Lord,
the Holy One, is here ;
come bow before him now
with reverence and fear :
in him no sin is found —
we stand on holy ground.
Be still,
for the presence of the Lord,
the Holy One, is here. | our radiant King of light !
Be still,
for the glory of the Lord
is shining all around. |
| 2 Be still,
for the glory of the Lord
is shining all around ;
he burns with holy fire,
with splendour he is crowned :
how awesome is the sight — | 3 Be still,
for the power of the Lord
is moving in this place ;
he comes to cleanse and heal,
to minister his grace :
no work too hard for him —
in faith receive from him.
Be still,
for the power of the Lord
is moving in this place. |

David J. Evans (b. 1957)

Prayer

Creator God, maker of all that is, we draw near and enter your holiness.
Your presence welcomes us; your love enfolds us; your power sustains us.
Jesus Christ, Son of God, Son of Man, we draw near and come to you.
Your example challenges us; your love forgives us; your peace restores us.
Holy Spirit, God around and within us and between us, we draw near, united by your power.
You lift our hearts in joyfulness; you guide our ways in obedience; your love enriches our love. Accept our worship, accept our praise; accept our dedication; for your holy name’s sake. **Amen.**

And/or you might like to use the following as “a way into prayer”

Close your eyes, and sit and listen. What can you hear? Is there just silence? Is there birdsong or traffic or voices? What do you need to quieten inside yourself? How listened-to do you feel? Share your thoughts with God.

Bible Reading Matthew 18: 15-20

⁵ “If your brother sins against you go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back. ¹⁶ But if he will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you, so that ‘every accusation may be upheld by the testimony of two or more witnesses,’ as the scripture says. ¹⁷ And if he will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally, if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or a tax collector.

¹⁸ "And so I tell all of you: what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.

¹⁹ "And I tell you more: whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them."

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Comment

How to fix broken relationships is the topic of our Bible reading today. In Matthew 18: 15-20 the focus is on relationships in Christian communities. Aspects of this can also be applied, helpfully, to families, friendships and colleagues.

Fixing broken things is time-consuming and can be more or less successful. We have a chair with broken webbing hidden beneath a cover. We really like the chair so over the years we have made various attempts to fix it with glue, staples and other adhesives. It has been held together sometimes by "a wing and a prayer". Anyone who sits in it knows it's a bit dodgy and they may end up sinking down low! We never offer it to guests though so don't worry that we will give this chair to you, if and when you can visit us in our house again! With this chair I suspect there is nothing strong enough to hold the webbing together, it needs a complete refit.

Human relationships are very different from chairs and other objects as they can be healed and repaired almost endlessly. The Gospel of Matthew suggests a process by which broken relationships within a Christian community may be fixed. When someone has sinned (and the oldest versions of texts do not say "against you"), a person is to go and point out the fault. If the person speaking is listened to then the member is restored. However, if that fails then the person is to take two or three witnesses and to go and speak again. And if that fails then the whole church is to hear about the problem.

What impresses me about these instructions is the efforts being put into restoring the person who has gone wrong. We might wonder what it feels like for the person who has their fault pointed out, as I guess no one likes having their faults examined. It might help us to note that here it is not just any old fault being mentioned but it is a "sin". This is going to be something which breaks the code of discipleship as it is being taught and understood in the early Christian communities. (Please see box below for more information about this Christian community). Given how vulnerable Christian communities were at this time it was especially important for them to find ways to agree and to be "held together" firmly. In this situation the person who is at fault might be glad, in the end, to have been helped back into the community and restored. The clue to this goal might be found in the parable of the lost sheep being restored which is told a few verses before today's passage.

Today's verses also draw our attention to the power of Christian gathering. When Christians unite around Jesus, God is there. When Christians listen to Jesus and follow his ways then they discern the ways of God and can put this into practice: always remembering the aim is to restore one another to unity and community and not to embarrass or disgrace one another.

The followers of Jesus at the time when this gospel book was written were facing many threats. They desperately needed to hold together and to have ways to sort out what was right for them. Today as churches we also need to be held together. The restrictions placed upon us by the current pandemic mean we have not been able to gather together in each other's presence. We have had to find new ways to be in contact with each other. At the same time there are lots of other options for us in terms of viewing worship from other churches or spending our time. This passage can perhaps serve to remind us of the importance of holding together.

From now on, many of us are going to be able again to join together in our building for worship and to encourage and support one another, and our wider neighbourhood. Every

single member of our church is an important part of our mission to fully express the love of God for all our neighbours. We need to be held together going forward. We will need to work at our relationships and all the more so as some of us can meet up face-to-face and others, for good reasons of health and opportunity, cannot yet do this.

This passage speaks to us not only as church communities. It also teaches us how to hold together with our families, friends and colleagues. The suggestion is that we shouldn't let our failures of each other or disappointments fester and develop into huge obstacles. It is much better to address problems with one another early on and talk them through. We might even look to find other people to help us sort out problems if we cannot manage this first between ourselves.

Nelson Mandela famously said that "resentment is like drinking poison and expecting it to kill your enemies". Amazingly, he built relationships even with his prison guards and invited them as guests of honour at his inauguration as President of South Africa when he was released from prison and elected.

It is my fervent hope and prayer that through this time at Christchurch we can pull together. We need the loyalty and commitment of every single person to help us keep our relationships with each other in good order, and to enable us to develop that sense of the presence of God from which we all benefit.

Questions to ponder

What would help me to feel more involved in my church community? What steps might I take to develop my sense of belonging?

Are my relationships all in good order? Is there anyone towards whom I feel resentment? How could God help me to lay that hurt down and be at peace?

More about Matthew's Gospel, and community and the context of Matthew 18: 15-20

The gospel of Matthew is anonymous but a tradition grew up in the early church that it was written by Matthew who was also called Levi. In this gospel it is mentioned that Matthew was a tax collector. (Note the reference to tax collector in chapter 18, verse 17 as being someone outside the community along with Gentiles). It is thought this gospel was written from Antioch in Syria for a Jewish and Gentile group of Christian believers. It was probably written between AD 50 and AD 96. The fact that chapter 18 contains so much about community relationships suggests there were problems in this group. There might have been disagreement about the need to keep all the traditional Jewish rules. Some people might have been emphasising their status as more important than others. At the same time the location of the parable of the lost sheep in this chapter suggests some were going astray. The teachings of Jesus were most probably very much needed then to help keep unity.

As in so many places in the gospel of Matthew, Old Testament teaching is also being drawn upon in chapter 18. A commandment in Leviticus 19: 17 stated that divisive resentment and anger should not be nursed between community members. This rule also guided the Qumran community and can be found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The comment in Matthew 18: 19 about anything two of the church members agree about being done by God the Father seems in this context, more likely to be about affirming the authority of the church members acting together to discipline someone, than about God delivering on the prayer requests of small groups. The emphasis across the whole of chapter 18 is on maintaining good community relationships. Today's verses are followed by teaching on forgiveness.

Prayer

We pray for those living in places
where brothers and sisters are not
reconciled,
where violence speaks out
and the voice of peace is not heard.
We pray for families who cannot listen

to one another's pain;
where bitterness speaks out
and the voice of understanding goes
unheard.
We pray for those communities
where diversity is not celebrated,

where prejudice speaks out
and the voice of tolerance is not heard.
We pray for Christians who cannot agree,
where doctrine excludes
and the voice of generosity is not heard.
We pray for one another,

that we might speak out with the voice of
truth,
and listen with ears of humility.
We pray in Jesus' name.
Amen.

And/or you might like to use the following as a "way into prayer"

Reflect on the phrase 'living together well'. Make a list of the characteristics of a good relationship and community. Give thanks for the elements present in your relationships and community, and ask for God's help and guidance in improving those that may be lacking.

Hymn

Lord of creation, to you be all praise! – *Singing the Faith 449 (Tune of "Be thou my Vision")*

- 1 Lord of creation, to you be all praise!
Most mighty your working, most wondrous your ways!
Your glory and might are beyond us to tell,
and yet in the heart of the humble you dwell.
- 2 Lord of all power, I give you my will,
in joyful obedience your tasks to fulfil.
Your bondage is freedom; your service is song;
and, held in your keeping, my weakness is strong.
- 3 Lord of all wisdom, I give you my mind,
rich truth that surpasses my knowledge to find;
what eye has not seen and what ear has not heard
is taught by your Spirit and shines from your word.
- 4 Lord of all bounty, I give you my heart;
I praise and adore you for all you impart,
your love to inspire me, your counsel to guide,
your presence to shield me, whatever betide.
- 5 Lord of all being, I give you my all;
if I should disown you, I stumble and fall;
but, led in your service your word to obey,
I'll walk in your freedom to the end of the way.

Jack Copley Winslow (1882–1974)

Blessing

As you have heard Christ's words, go and be Christ's people.
Listen, encourage, reconcile.

Be strengthened in all your doing and all your being by the power of the Living God,
who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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