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

***“Heaven and Earth”***

***September 10, 2023***

Jesus doesn’t make it easy, does he?

A lot of us are so, so, so allergic to conflict that we will bend ourselves into a pretzel, lose sleep, miss out on important or fun events, or even switch churches before we would ever think of confronting someone with whom we disagreed in a church setting.

The business of church – what we have become institutionally – was definitely beyond what Jesus could have envisioned then.

Heck, church today is different from the church that so many of us here grew up in or witnessed even 20 years ago.

And as we all know, church people are no different from anyone else and that includes those of us who serve as pastors.

We all share in probably too much judgment and not enough forgiveness.

Some of the people I’ve had the honor to talk to from outside our congregation will often offer what I choose to believe is a compliment with some form of “I’m not big into church but if I was I would want to come to the Federated Church (or something like it if they’re not from around here).

I’d like to believe that is because they see us acting on our faith.

But we all know that there have been times when differences of opinion in the direction this church would move in have resulted in a lot of hurt and the departure of some members in the past.

Here in this passage from Matthew, it’s not the fight that Jesus is interested in.

He doesn’t care what the conflict is.

And the kicker, the tough part to swallow, is that Jesus puts the burden to make things right on the person who has been sinned against.

Jesus doesn’t care who is right and who is wrong – he is all about getting back together.

With each progressive step Jesus offers, he involves more people in the resolution.

And contrary to how some have interpreted the final strategy of treating the one with whom you can find no way to resolve the conflict, “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and tax collector” as meaning to kick them out and have nothing to do with them, it’s important to remember, Jesus chose to invite in and spend time and include Gentiles and tax collectors.

We are to love the ones who offend as much as we love God and ourselves.

One writer reminded me that “Life in community would be easy if it weren’t for the people.” (Kayla McClurg, *Passage by Passage: A Gospel Journey,* 52)

Ah, the people – if only they could see the world the way we do, have the same priorities and experiences that inform their decisions.

Jesus knew just how hard, like herding cats for sure, it is to be in community with one another.

Jesus makes a point here of lifting up groups, clusters, church – “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

The perfect answer to “Why does anyone need church?”

We need each other and thus we will need to be in the forgiveness business every day of our lives.

But for all the potential for conflict when you throw dozens of folks together and tell them to love each other and the world, we also know that when the going gets rough – be it the death of a loved one, a child or sibling in trouble, the end of a marriage, a serious illness – it’s the community that we are all tied to here that will be there through the pain and loss and tears.

A church that takes care of each other is a living and breathing way we feel God’s presence.

Not in the towering over us, looking down from above way that so much of popular culture uses to depict God. Rather it is in the hug, the offer of tissues, the ear that listens to the same story a dozen times, the casserole dropped off, the asking after one’s children or grandchildren.

These are the way God’s love is made manifest.

This is why it is so important to work at our relationships and why it is such a gift to invite others into this treasure we know as church.

I am a living and breathing example that a simple invitation to be a part of a church community has the power to change a life.

I thank God that my friend Susan invited me to her church 31 years ago.

In a few weeks, you will welcome Andris & his family into this church to share in the love you all know here.

Today, with Rally Sunday and the beginning of the church school year, we are inviting our children to have an active role in this loving community bringing with them their energy and curiosity.

What a blessing it is to be church – whether within these 170+ year old walls or out in our community or among our neighbors farther afield.

We are messengers of God’s love through the living of our days.

Amid the joy of our shared potluck lunch today, take a moment to look around and give thanks for all of your fellow humans with whom you get to do God’s work.

Let us now lift up in prayer these words from Rev. Bill Hoch who coordinates the Mission work of the New England Conference, UMC on our behalf:

*Lord, you call us into community, yet we so often prefer to struggle alone.  
We think we have all the answers even though you command us to work together to do better,   
For when two or three of us come together, you are with us.  
   
We hear the command to love our neighbor, but we cannot see the neighbor at the inn   
       who has journeyed,   
                      struggled,   
                               been hungry,   
                                     speaks a different language,   
and yearns only for welcome and a safe home.  
   
Heavenly One, your commands are so simple: work together for love.  
Give us the strength to be your Holy Church,   
           Stronger together  
           Loving our neighbor.   
Today Lord I will reach out, call back, return the email, strengthen the connection.  
Today, with you as our guide, we will pursue your will together. Amen.*