

## **MESSAGE: Two's Company – Three is... Where Jesus is?**

A reflection based on Matthew 18:15-20.

Pastor Hubert Den Draak, Pinegrove Sept. 7, 2014

In the mid-eighties I lived in Montreal for a while. I had no car, so for church I went to the nearest congregation within walking distance. It happened to be the Anglican Church of the Ascension, a wonderfully warm community of faith. One day a letter came in from a church in Connecticut we had never heard of, inviting 5 people from our congregation to be their guest for 3 days and worship with them. We only had to pay for the trip, everything else was taken care of. This was part of an outreach program they had, to each year invite 5 people from different congregations to spend some time with them.

So, five of us piled into a car and drove up to a small place called New Canaan, Connecticut, an affluent bedroom community just outside of N.Y. City.

It was to be my first experience with what's called a "Mega church".

I couldn't believe my eyes when we got there: the parking lot looked like the one for Disneyland, complete with busses and golf carts shuttling people back and forth all the time.

We got dropped off at what I thought was the church, but turned out to be just the wedding chapel. "No, the church is over there", people smiled, and pointed in the direction of what I thought was a shopping mall. It was the church all right, and it could comfortably seat over 2500 people, 3000 in a pinch.

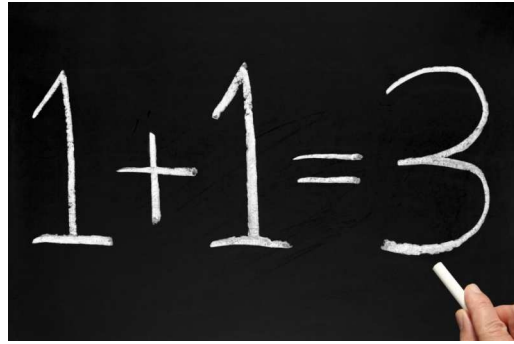


There was a bookstore, a restaurant, a bridal boutique and a souvenir shop. The sanctuary had stadium seating, a gospel choir with a recording contract, a sound system to turn the Rolling Stones green with envy, big video monitors wherever you looked, and friendly, smiling people everywhere.

It knocked my socks off. I had no idea something like this existed. Clearly, this was one spectacularly successful church. Clearly, size matters. Clearly, bigger *is* better.

Now this was almost 30 years ago (hard to believe!), and since then the term Mega Church has become more familiar in church circles, mostly South of the border. I think it's fair to say that here in Canada we're a bit leery of them. They're too flashy, too ostentatious, too show-oriented, too... well, if we're honest with ourselves: they are too successful. After all, who can argue with 2000 or 3000 people -or more- attending every Sunday? Sounds pretty successful to me!

And then... then we read Matthew 18, in which Jesus says that maybe bigger is *not* better. Maybe, if size matters, it's the *small* size that counts. For Jesus, less really is more: "Where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, that's is where I am". Not two or three *thousand*, but just... two or three. It's a very, very powerful verse. It tells us that a handful of people who get together in God's name *can* make a real difference. It tells us that big numbers are irrelevant, just not important to experience God's grace through Jesus' presence.



It also tells us something else, something just as essential. It tells us that faith is not a private matter. Faith is not something we can go off and enjoy by ourselves all alone, sitting by a stream or on a mountain top or walking in the woods. Of course those precious, private moments can feed our faith, but life in Christ happens when we are gathered *together*, even if it's just two or three. Together, in our faith community we can *share* grief and joy, sadness and celebration. A faith community, *this faith* community is a very precious gift, offering you something that you will never get on your own.

In a true community, we are all intimately aware of each other, just like family. Now mind you, in some families, the *illusion* of harmony is more important than anything else. To those families confrontation is to be avoided at all costs. For them, dealing with hurt and pain is to pretend nothing happened, to sweep it under the rug.

In some other families, "silence is golden". If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all, and if there's a problem, keep it to yourself. Sounds familiar...?

Matthew clearly dismisses those attitudes and acknowledges: yes, living in a community is hard. Like any relationship, it *takes* work to *make* it work. Matthew wrote his gospel for some of the very first Christian communities who were going through tough times. Basically, they were inventing the church as they went along, so of course that meant a lot of different opinions and ideas, and in that process people sometimes got hurt. And with the outside world watching them closely, their first response was to pretend that nothing was the matter, to brush their issues under the carpet; out of sight, out of mind.

Don't do that, Matthew says, that only makes things worse. Don't think in terms of who's right and who's wrong, or in terms of damage control or public appearances. Think in terms of the *community* that suffers, and know that if the community suffers, Jesus suffers. So work things out in such a way that both parties win, so that the entire community benefits. Any unresolved issue between two community members or *any* unpleasant stuff that gets ignored is like a festering wound. It means the entire body, the entire community suffers.

Thinking back of my Mega-church experience of almost 30 years ago, I checked the internet to see how that congregation in New Canaan was doing these days. Turns out they don't exist anymore, their property turned into a shopping mall. Of course nothing lasts forever, there are many, many reasons churches close their doors. But I have a feeling that lack of true community was one of the reasons.

In the end it doesn't matter if the sanctuary bursts with 3000 people, with an award-winning gospel choir and the latest high-tech equipment. Nor does it matter if you're in a rickety church with a dodgy sound system and just a dozen people in the pews. It doesn't even matter if you're *not* in a church building but meet at someone's home to experience Jesus' presence.



No matter what size the faith community is, what matters is if it's open to God's loving spirit; if it's open to inviting the Christ-like presence of humility and tenderness into a conversation with each other. What matters is that we take our place in a community of faith, small as it may be, and be transformed by God's grace.  
Amen.