

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Built to Last

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Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks in hazy parables and upends social norms with beatitudes that require us to stop and think. Who are we? What do we value?

And on other occasions, Jesus' words ring clear as a bell. We may want to ignore what he asks because it is hard. Jesus doesn't call Lone Rangers. To be one of his followers was hard work back then and remains so today. To belong to God through Jesus requires us to be in a relationship with others. Plain and simple.

The lectionary readings for the next several weeks take us deep into the Gospel of Matthew as Jesus shapes his followers to become the foundation of the church we embody today.

His words are central to this sermon series on *Belonging*. We will explore how we belong to God through Jesus and his church, particularly this church, the people of Westminster.

To set our reading in context, Jesus stops along the road to Jerusalem to teach. He begins with some of that hyperbole that might confuse if read literally. Cut off a foot or hand if it causes one to stumble. Go tear out an eye and throw away rather than be led "into the hell of fire."

In other words, Jesus tells us to have integrity. We cannot let other loyalties or prejudices keep us from belonging to him.

Then he offers a short parable of a shepherd in search of one lost sheep. Jesus teaches us to preserve the community by seeking after anyone who drifts away.

If God is willing to come to us as Jesus, Jesus tells us to go out and find the lost. They need us and we need them.

Those are my shorthand interpretations of his two not-so-subtle teachings of “how to be the church” just before today’s lesson in which Jesus minces no words.

Dear God, Thank you for loving us so much to enter into human form, to walk with us, and teach us how to be loved by you. As we hear these words, silence the noise around that distracts us so that Jesus startles us with your truth and we desire only to belong to you. Amen.

Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two

others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

¹⁷ If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Presbyterian elder and scholar James Deming studies church history to understand how Europe has become so secular. And, in his personal life, Deming loves to play and watch soccer.

When he joined a recreational team with some of his seminary students, it struck him to study the two passions side-by-side: soccer and religion. Deming traced the decline of the churches in England alongside the rise of modern soccer.

During the Victorian Era, the country's elite formed teams that then trickled down to compete with teams formed among the working class of the villages. By the turn of the century soccer permeated every facet of life.

These soccer clubs began to attract fans as the churches' struggle grew with the "boy problem," as he names it. Deming writes, "(t)raditionally, logic and rationality were tied to masculinity, and religion was marginalized to the private, non-rational sphere. In other words, there was a growing belief that real men don't do church." Once the churches confirmed young men, they slipped away, only returning to get married.

In an attempt to keep them in the pews, churches tried a new tactic: sports. Churches sponsored soccer teams. This led Deming to discover one third of the current English Premier League teams began as church clubs. However, their plans backfired.

These local teams offered the people new identities and began to infuse them with a sense of belonging they previously felt toward the local church. The people lost sight of the church's calendar each week or season. They shaped their lives around practice, matches,

and tournaments. They met one another in the stands rather than the pews.¹

Soccer appealed to the breadth of the community, across a diversity of income and age, ability and gender, fueling its growth. Yes, soccer is that irresistible. And at the same time, the church stumbled and stumbled with the infighting, eroding trust.

As Deming noted, this allowed soccer's rational scorekeeping and masculinity to shine. Turning to soccer satisfied the desire to belong to a winner.

In soccer, players are chosen for talents and drilled to become better players. The sport pits teams, one against another, to award winners over losers. This infectious game gives license to divide us as we claim loyalties. When conceived in fun, it's exhilarating.

I played field hockey in high school and have spent much of my life baking in the hot sun or frigid cold to cheer my team. I get it. I understand wearing Steeler jerseys and all the ways we rally behind the home team.

¹ "A New Goal," Princeton Theological Seminary, July 24, 2023, <https://www.ptsem.edu/news/a-new-goal>

As an aside, I burst into tears along with Coco Gauff last night as she won the US Open. We love the thrill of victory. I shed more tears when she knelt down center court to pray. She gave it her all and then thanked God.

Back to soccer. It became just another way to fuel our human propensity to rank one person over another, to measure strength, to pursue human achievement.

But, when loyalties pit us against one another in the competitive arena, we become more susceptible to buying into a model of ranking people and organizations, of a winner-take-all to shape all aspects of our lives.

When we forget that we first and foremost belong to God, competitive impulses gives way to putting our all into the team-spirit or the partisan ideology to shine as a winner.

When we forget that we belong to God, the other loyalty makes it okay, more than okay, it satisfies the desire to feel superior through professional status, and social circles. Partisan politics. Ethnicity. Income. Education. Gated communities. The list goes on.

To feel as though we belong to any of these insider groups above all else condones an insensitivity towards another's struggles, belittles efforts that fall short, dismisses failures as inherent faults.

It infects some to think it's okay to deliberately hurt another or not play by the rules in order to win. When it becomes the norm to only celebrate winners and let the weak ones fall away, the whole community suffers.

On that dusty road to Jerusalem, when Jesus knew his clash with Rome would lead to his death, he stops to instruct his followers. They'd understand soon enough that God's love will overcome evil, that love wins. Once God reveals this eternal truth, Jesus wants them to know that they will be the ones to build a church to embody his love against divisive hate.

Given that the church grew, despite the dictators and power regimes that have grown and faded away over the last two thousand years...given that the church stands tall despite the ethnic and team rivalries that claimed loyalty along the way...given that the church harbored the weak and persecuted from oppressors....given that the church became the voice to liberate those enslaved....given that the church continues to advocate for justice, perhaps the church is the place for real men and women, to build the strength and skills to live.

As his followers drew together and handed down the tradition, Jesus knew that conflict would occur. He needed them to know that he would be with them in their hard and holy work. He prescribes how to reconcile rather than divide after someone offends.

First don't avoid it. Go direct to the source. Share your concerns.

Don't gossip. Do not tell everyone else ahead of time. Go to the one who hurt you or who has strayed. This shows respect for another and allows that person to clear up misunderstandings or to apologize. You might hear what's going on in that person's life and have a bit more compassion.

If this doesn't work, don't gang up. Seek out a few others who also share the mutual desire to heal in confidence, not to shame or blame.

If the offender persists, in the spirit of reclaiming the lost sheep, go to the whole community, not a faction that might likely agree with you. In the diversity of the church, everyone is held accountable, and everyone gets to participate in the desire to heal.

And, if the person remains defiant, don't excommunicate. When Jesus instructs us to accept this one as a Gentile or tax collector, he

wants us to see this other person as someone to whom God still extends grace and mercy. Jesus came that all might be saved.²

In the community of faith, we will not always be the ones doing the truth telling – sometimes we will be the one to hear how we've hurt someone else. And the quality of our listening and responding can speed recovery or deepen the wounds.

Overtime, we will witness the people who possess enough love for Jesus and his church to confront an offense, are the same people whom you can call at 2 am in the dark of need. These are also the same people who show up at your door with bags of groceries when your parent dies. These are the people who listens to to your child when your child refuses to talk to you.

Jesus knows the stakes are high. He promises, “if two or three are gathered together in my name, I am among them there.” His presence among us promises justice and mercy.

I hope the weight of Jesus' instructions give you pause, not to retreat, but to know that in these hard and holy conversations, his love encircles all of us. You see the other as a child of God. And, it asks others to see you as a child of God. This way exemplifies how

² Matthew Myers Boulton, “Life Together,” *SALT*, September 3, 2023, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/8/30/life-together-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-fourteenth-week-after-pentecost>

to be the church, generation after generation, instills the “muscle memory” of an athlete to belong to him through the church.

Maybe the church is the place where we learn to do just what we need to do everywhere – speak honestly, discreetly, with compassion, and listen.

The church becomes relevant when we become the agents of integrity and good out in the community. We all become stronger by saying and doing what’s right for all of us.

Like a coach, who wants only the best for his players and team, Jesus leads us into the loving relationships we need and our world needs.



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