

CHANGING THE WORLD

Sermon for Pentecost 14A, Proper 18: Mat 18:15-20, Rom 13:8-14

LPC, 9/10/17

The late, great anthropologist Margaret Mead is supposed to have said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." On the other hand, the late great humorist George Carlin is supposed to have said, "Never underestimate the power of stupid people in large groups." With which quotation do you find yourself most in sympathy this morning, I wonder?

I confess I often find myself more in sympathy with the latter sentiment, the one about the power of stupid people, than of the former, about thoughtful committed people changing the world. I can't help thinking that thoughtful, committed citizens would not have to change the world if stupid people in large groups hadn't messed it up. That sentiment is probably not worthy of me, and I'd like to raise myself, and this sermon, to a higher level.

Seriously, both quotations do agree on the power of individuals when joined with a group of like-minded people. The disparity between the two quotations is in the expectation of the outcome. Margaret Mead assumes that high-minded people acting together will have a positive effect on the world, while George Carlin's implication is that large numbers of stupid people acting together have a negative effect. But both celebrities agree on how joint efforts magnify the efforts of individuals.

In our Sunday lectionary's progress through the Gospel of Matthew this Pentecost Season, we are at a point where Jesus is addressing his followers as a group, anticipating the effect that his individual followers will have when they join together as church. Indeed, the earliest Christians, the disciples, are a perfect example of Margaret Mead's small group changing the world. The teachings we hear this week are the beginning of a series of teachings of how Christians should behave together: in other words, how individual believers become church.

Matthew is the only one of the Gospels to put the word *ekklesia*, the word translated "church," into the mouth of Jesus. It is clear that this passage anticipates followers of Jesus banding together to keep the story straight and to strengthen and support each other in persecution. Eventually to do this they needed some kind of organization, some guidelines for how to function in a group.

What is described in these particular verses is what Jesus says to do if a fellow member of the group sins against you. The approach of first going alone to the offender is consistent with what Jesus says earlier in Matthew's gospel, where Jesus advises being reconciled with an offending brother or sister before offering your gift at the altar.

This teaching goes beyond that, describing what to do if your brother or sister then refuses to listen to you. The next step is to take witnesses. The next step after that is to report the offense publicly to the assembled church. The final sanction is to shun the offender.

There are churches that follow this procedure to the letter. I personally think some flexibility is called for. The situation described by Jesus here assumes that the person with the

complaint is right and justified, whereas conflict between members of any church can be a nuanced thing, requiring the hearing of both points of view. Besides, the publication of a private conflict between two individual members can be unnecessarily hurtful to the entire group. There are situations where following Jesus' teaching here to the letter may not be the best thing to do in a church. But I don't think this teaching is intended as a checklist.

The main truth of this teaching lies in the realization that following Jesus is a corporate enterprise. Christians are meant to join together with other Christians. Christians are to value their relationships with other Christians, and to take extraordinary steps to preserve their relationships with other members of the church. The point here is not so much to follow all these steps to the letter in resolving conflict with another member of the church, but *that* you take steps, many measured, rational steps, before writing someone off. The reason to do this is because the community is God's family. The church is the very body of Christ.

This means that you cannot be a Christian in isolation. To be a Christian, to be a follower of Christ, is to be connected with other humans, so that you can live out the double commandment to love God and love other people. As Paul says to the Romans, "love is the fulfilling of the law." You can't love God, hate people, and call yourself a follower of Jesus. We are to go to some trouble to include people, even offensive people in our circle of love.

Today we have a baptism, a ceremony of inclusion. Our practice of baptizing people in church on Sunday before the entire church community rather than just within the family is a demonstration that baptism is incorporation into the church, not just some sort of naming ceremony, spiritual cleansing or immunization from evil. Baptism is incorporation into the church, God's family, the very body of Christ. Christianity is a corporate faith. We are all part one of another.

That is why we go to extra trouble to remain in relationship with each other. Instead of nursing grudges or stewing over past offenses, we approach someone who has hurt us to restore the relationship. Instead of complaining about that person to third parties, we first seek conversation with that person.

We have a responsibility toward one another, and it's not just about pointing out faults. It's about sharing the vision, remembering our common story, supporting each other, sharing joys and sorrows. It also means that we ourselves are upheld. We will vow to uphold these children, J.B. and Katie, in their life in Christ, but we don't just have that relationship with the children.

Look around you, to your right and your left. These are the people are upholding you in your life in Christ, at this moment, and at some possible future moment when you may really need it. These are the people you are to uphold.

By loving one another this way, we may indeed change the world, as Margaret Mead suggests. We will at least not be standing in the way as God changes the world.