



Roanoke, Virginia

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## ***“Second Alive; A Fundamental Reason”***

*Matthew 18:15-20*

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Last Sunday, we had our first Officer Training session. We began with the newly elected elders sharing their faith journeys, how they came to faith and why they accepted the call to serve the church in this way. Two of them said that being asked to serve as an elder of this congregation was one of the *greatest honors of their lives*.

I feel that way. I’m honored to serve this church as a *teaching* elder (which is what Ministers of Word and Sacrament are called these days). It got me thinking about why. Why is this congregation worth serving as an elder? And with this being the Sunday before Commitment Sunday, why is this congregation worth supporting?

I could provide many reasons. So can the *Second Alive* videos, a few of which you saw earlier. But listing a bunch of reasons may not be the best use of a sermon’s time. Let’s listen to a passage and listen for what I think is a fundamental reason why a healthy congregation—why *this* congregation—is worthy of support. You will need to listen carefully because the answer may not be obvious at first.

So, give a listen... and listen for the Word of God.

<sup>15</sup>“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. <sup>16</sup>But 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. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

I bet not many of you have heard this passage used for a Stewardship sermon. Maybe a sermon on worship—, or more likely, you’ve heard the last line paraphrased as a Call to Worship. The prelude ends and the liturgist rises to say something like,

“We are gathered together in the house of God. We do so with confidence because we come into God’s presence remembering the words of Jesus when he said, ‘Where two or more are gathered in my name, I am with you.’”

I don’t think Jesus minds our using what he says to call folks into worship—even though he isn’t talking about worship when he says it. You heard the passage when I read it, you heard what Jesus was talking about. He was talking about how to move forward when someone has been wronged. Peter heard what Jesus said. If I had kept reading past the passage, I would have read his follow-up question: “How many times do we have to do this? Seven times? Seven times seventy.”

Jesus isn’t talking about worship when he talks about two or more gathering in his name. He is talking about working things out when one has wronged another. Go to the person. Enlist a mediator and witnesses. Take a formal route. If that doesn’t work, maybe keep a barrier between you. He is talking about doing the often hard but essential work of addressing the fissures in life that come of our sin... or simply come of our being human. He is talking about *reconciliation*.

This is what his teachings were about. Start reading his parables and you’ll see what I mean:

- When he tells of a man attacked and left to die on the side of the road, look who stops to help him... and who doesn’t.
- When he tells of the ungrateful servant, consider how the servant does forgive another a day’s wages when the king forgave him millions.
- When he tells of a guy who turns his back on his brother when he comes home and the father who runs to welcome him, what is he talking about?

His teachings are about reconciliation. Reconciliation is what his life and ministry are about:

- Consider the arguments he has with self-righteous people about who is welcome in God’s presence and what is the true intent of the Law of love.
- Think about his upending cultural norms by eating with the publicly shamed and praising the faith of the rejected who demonstrate acts of grace and kindness.
- Think about his forgiving a paralytic’s sins before telling him to rise and walk.

Reconciliation is what his death and resurrection are about: as seen by

- his asking forgiveness for those who crucified him as he died,
- and, after his being raised, calling together disciples who abandoned him
  - to tell them they are loved
  - and have a place in his cause to share God’s love with *all* the world.



So no, Jesus isn't saying that when two or more are gathered to conduct the business of worship, he will be in on that meeting or on that call (if the worship is livestreamed). We trust that he is with us when we worship—after all, worship is a holy means by which hearts and minds are reconciled to God—and that is why this passage can be used for a Call to Worship. But Jesus is saying that “**anytime people join together for the cause of reconciliation, I'm in.**”

Jesus is being realistic because two or more gathering has to happen for life to happen. Whether harm is caused, or a way is found toward mutual well-being, things have to be worked out. The relationships can be personal, business, or political, people have to deal with each other. And if we're going to live in ways that build each other up rather than tear each other down, we must be about what heals wounds and builds bridges.

The advantage of a church—a healthy church, anyway—is that it clearly sees that it is to be about reconciliation if it is to be the body of Christ in the world.

I said “healthy church” because it is true that not every congregation remembers this. Some congregations fuel division and dysfunction more than they practice empathy and promote shalom (which is a word that means peace, but so much more than what we mean when we say peace. But that's another sermon).

Anyway, though not every congregation is true to its fundamental role, a congregation that takes seriously its call to witness the Gospel of reconciliation is about this work.

We need those congregations. It's David Brooks opinion that we need those kind of congregations in America more than ever. Brooks has been doing research for a new book that addresses two questions:

1. Why are Americans more sad these days?
2. And why are Americans getting meaner?

He talks about his research in an interview with Sean Illing, excerpts of which are contained in an article sent to me.<sup>1</sup> Brooks quotes statistics that suggest that these two trends are connected. Among the trends of sadness he quotes are

- the rising rates of substance abuse and suicide,
- the growing number of those who say they do not have close friends,
- and the rising number of those “**who have persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.**”

Among the trends of meanness he quotes are;

- the rise in murder rates the last few years,
- the decline in charitable giving,
- and the toxic rise in hateful speech in public places.

Brooks sees the sadness and meanness connecting. Hostility causes some

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/23890762/david-brooks-america-capitalism-democracy-the-gray-area>



- to distrust relationships,
- which drives them into loneliness
- that can only be cured by relationships.

Brooks goes on to mourn the loss of those communities that, in his words, “constrain our natural selfishness.” Over the last couple of generations, we’ve been losing communities that

- hold the middle by teaching the moral skills of selflessness and empathy—how to listen and how to find common ground,
- and which promotes the value of achieving the greater good even when it is not the perfect good.

Without those communities, the world gets meaner.

Some have left communities, including churches, because they have toxic experiences. But that is like refusing to eat because you got food poisoning. Eating isn’t the problem. Poisoning is. Communities can be the problem, and some retreat into siloed communities of like-minded people who then condemn other groups who think differently—thus contributing to the toxicity. Yes, communities can be the problem, but they also are the means by which healing, and health comes. We need less toxic communities and more reconciling ones.

If Second Presbyterian Church is the kind of healthy community that is needed in the world, then that is the fundamental reason it is worth serving as an elder and supporting as a member. And just so we don’t think about this hypothetically, allow me to offer some real-world examples of why I find it an honor to serve this congregation—why Millie and I consider our giving to Second Presbyterian Church to be the most joyful giving that we do.

Here's a snapshot of the reconciling work of this congregation beyond these walls:

It is in our congregation’s identity statement that we don’t affiliate with special interest organizations and don’t pass position statements about issues. That is to say, we don’t spend energy trying to parse the differences we have with the hope of settling them once and for all. We *will* study them and talk about them. If we’re going to take seriously Christ’s call to be a community of reconciliation, we have to look at the wounds of the world caused by exploitation, racism, poverty, tribalism, neglect, and abuse. But we give our energy to finding enough common ground and consensus to *do reconciling work* even while we still struggle to figure things out.

So,

- Homelessness is an issue. As we study it and talk about it, we give money and hours to build Habitat houses and host families who are struggling to stay off the streets.
- Certain neighborhoods are in distress, and there are social and racial undertones to how this evolved. As we study, debate, and think about how this happened we throw strong support behind the PCC, Ram House, programs at risk schools, and other efforts to bring neighborhoods up.



- Affordable health care is a problem. We could debate forever on why it is and how to fix it politically, and at the end everyone would be right about some things and wrong about others—while often nothing is done. But while we study and discuss, this church sends medical teams overseas, and supports the Bradley Free Clinic and Horizon Health here at home.

So much healing of community wounds would not be happening without Second Presbyterian and other communities that refuse to remain isolated from problems but engage them. This is true in many ways, including it being a financial fact.

Here's a snapshot of the reconciling work of this congregation *within* these walls:

We worship and we study. In worship, we raise up the vision of God's Realm where justice is defined by mercy and, in the end, all will be made whole. In our studies, we teach moral tradition so we can learn to be kind and not mean, loving and not hateful.

We overcome the isolation and loneliness Brooks talked about through the fellowship of our church community, the care of the hurting, and the visitation of those who are confined to their homes.

Here's a snapshot of the reconciling work of this congregation *within* hearts and minds:

In worship, we hear truths that are not said much in other places. We hear we are beloved children of God and are saved by grace. They are reconciling truths because they speak to the deepest loneliness we can know and that the loneliness of believing we are condemned by our wrongs and abandoned at death.

Grounded in God's love, we gain strength that we can be more the healers than the harmed, more the gracious than the mean, more the reconcilers than the dividers when we engage in other relationships where love sometimes has too many strings and demands taking a side.

We hear these truths, we pray about them, and we discover that the reconciling work we can do in the world is possible because of the reconciling work God does within our own hearts and lives.

I'm not saying this congregation is perfect. Perfection is not in the cards. I am saying that this is a congregation that stives to be an imperfect, broken, body of Christ in the world— and, for me, that is the fundamental reason why it is such a privilege to serve and support.

