

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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“Church; Seen and Unseen”

Matthew 18:15-20

George C. Anderson



I will be gone next week, and I'll not be worth much for a while after getting back from Inda for my daughter Paige's second wedding to Ansh Mathur. They had a Christian ceremony in our living room and now comes the Hindu ceremony and it's three days of events.

We'll have an amazing experience and I'm looking forward to getting to know Ansh's family better, but right now I'm in Stress Stage. My biggest stress is the Anderson Family Dance. It is the tradition that the families of bride and groom dance at one of the events, a choreographed dance. Now, I *love* to dance, but it's the *choreographed* part that intimidates me. Well, we've been practicing, and we'll see how it goes.

I do delight in seeing dancers dance—and I mean trained and talented dancers. It's been a joy to see Amy Potter, Sara Cate Bingham, Meredith Kelderhouse, Kit Polly and more perform at a high level. Watching great dancers dance doesn't keep the rest of us from dancing. In fact, I think they inspire the rest of us to enjoy dancing even more. Their choreography can inspire our freewheeling it. Think of



choreography as a sacramental ritual or liturgy. *Choreography celebrates movement.* It is a ritual of movement to celebrate movement itself.

It certainly would be a mistake to judge good dancing by my bad dancing. And it would be a mistake to judge gardening by my bad gardening. Some of you might remember Wes Macy, a skilled gardener who grew hundreds of bonsai trees. Bonsai is not a species. A bonsai tree can be a citrus tree, maple tree, fig tree, juniper tree, jade plant and more—any plant that will bear a trunk, branches, and limbs proportionate to the size of the tree so that a young plant can be made to look quite old. That’s the goal for a lot of bonsai gardeners: to carefully train and prune a young plant so that it takes on the appearance of one beaten into beauty by harsh weather, or looking as if it clings to the earth with its deep roots even though the roots are actually quite shallow. You might say that good bonsai art, like beautiful flower arranging, is liturgical. It is elevated gardening to celebrate gardening.

My sermon this morning is about the church. I would like to suggest that the organized church is also a choreography of sorts that celebrates something larger and better than itself. How well an organized church does this is as wide open a field as those who garden beautifully and those who intentionally trash protected sites. And I want to raise the question as to whether the whole church should be judged by its poorest expressions.

Listen to our passage and see if you can’t glimpse a description of what church is meant to be.

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. ¹⁶ 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. 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.”

As you heard, I want to talk about “church.” I want to talk about church because,

- on the one hand,
 - I love the church and am called to serve it,
- and, on the other hand,
 - I know that certain churches can be poor expressions of what church is to be about. I understand why some criticize the church and leave it.



We can be helped to think about the church by a very old way of talking about it. In the 2nd century, Clement of Alexandria spoke of a distinction

- between the *Church Visible* and the *Church Invisible*,
- or maybe the *Church Seen* and the *Church Unseen*,
- or maybe the *Church-We-See* and the *Church-God-Sees*.

Clement's distinction stuck. Theologians over the centuries have used it to speak to church controversies of their day. For instance, in the 4th century, St. Augustine, an African bishop in the Roman Church, talked about the distinction¹ in reminding Christians not to confuse certain public Christians with true Christians. He didn't want the folks under his charge to be discouraged by those who justify their corruption in the name of Christ.

In the 16th century, John Calvin talked about it to refute the notion that the only true church is the Roman Catholic Church and those outside it cannot be saved.

And then, in the 21st century came George Anderson who is going to talk about the distinction right now. I want to talk about it because I think the distinction helps us who love the church for the transformative difference it can make in lives and in the world be *less defensive* and *more empathetic* when people share criticisms and pain because of their church experiences.

So, what is the Church Visible—

- the organized church to which I am called as a minister,
 - and from which some have fled—
- the church that loved and nurtured me,
 - and traumatized others—
- the church that can be so sacrificial in its service of the world in Christ's name
 - and yet also can be concerned more about its own survival and growth than in giving of its life in service of Christ?

The Church Visible—the Seen Church—is any organized group—

- however healthy or unhealthy,
- polished or raw,
- selfish or selfless—

any organized group that seeks to be that community that bears the name of Christ in the world.

That's pretty wide open. There have been good and necessary attempts to set up boundaries by identifying “signs of the church.” For example,

¹ Although, according to one Ph.D dissertation at Princeton, Augustine never used (or at least published) the terms “Church Visible and Invisible” while addressing the distinction between the externally structured church and the church known to God.



- If we listen to Reformed theologians, they'll say that the Visible Church is any church where the *Word of God is proclaimed, and the sacraments rightly administered.*
- Or, if we listen to some Church historians, they'll say that any legitimate church is the church that is about what the earliest church was about: worship, education, fellowship, compassion, and justice.
- Or, if we listen to those who emphasize the spiritual nature of the church, they'll say that a legitimate, visible church is one where the spirit is present. A church seeks connection with God through connection with others seeking God, possibly through spiritual disciplines like 12 step programs, prayer practices, organized pilgrimages, and retreats.

If none of those three examples of church criteria don't suit you, there are others. But that's an important discussion, but one for another Sunday (though probably a Sunday School class and not a sermon). What is important for today is that however you would describe a church—whether you insist on

- a bishop or a presbytery;
- a vestry, session, board of deacons, or trustees;
- an educated pastor or a charismatic one;
 - one voted in or one placed,
 - a married one or an unmarried one
 - or no pastor at all
- a church with two sacraments, seven, or none,
- a congregation of a denomination or a church that stands alone,
- a church that is welcoming or a cult that is closed—

however you set the church up, it is going to be a *human* creation.

That is the promise and the problem of an organized church. Like humans themselves, the organized church can bear the image of God and reflect the words and life of Jesus in amazing ways. But no church will ever get it completely right, and sometimes churches get it all wrong.

- Maybe some pastors need to be defrocked because of their abuse of others,
- maybe some congregations should cease to be because they do more harm than good,

but the best of churches are like the best of every other human community there is—

- family,
- neighborhood,
- fraternity or sorority,
- club,
- nation...



it has the potential for both grace and disgrace.

Forgive me if I now sound like a huckster, but I can offer this congregation, Second Presbyterian, as an example of how a flawed, human, organization can bear God's image and be witness to grace. This congregation is an example of the Church Visible. You can come to 214 Mountain Ave and see where we often meet to worship, or go to our YouTube page to join in. You can pick up or download our Annual Report and read all about us. We have

- a budget,
- a leadership board called a "Session,"
- a calendar of events,
- a membership role,
- and various programs and ministries of outreach.

Later, you will hear Al McLean about designated funds. They are visible. A bulletin insert has descriptions of them which tell about what they do. They reflect the priorities of this congregation.:

- taking maintenance costs off the budget,
- maximizing ministries of worship, education, study, and fellowship within the community,
- and funding outreach ministries in the larger world.

You can see us. You can see other churches that look like us. Down the road is St. John's Episcopal. The way they take care of their members and serve the world, they look like us—only with more kneeling. Across town is Loudan Ave. Christian Church. That's a predominately black church, but in the way that really matter—their ministry and mission—they look like us too. And I could go on. There are a lot of congregations where grace abounds within and beyond church walls.

But none of the congregations I mentioned live up fully to the call to be Christ's body in the world. There are limitations, problems, mistakes, opportunities missed and opportunities botched. Still, should evidence of a human community being human be disqualifying? Where would any friendship, family, or support group be if that were the case?

There are other congregations that are visible too, with budgets, calendars of events, people in charge, and things they do.

- There are churches with sermons on Sundays,
 - and the sermons are meant to coerce obedience through fear and shame.
- There is the church that has a spreadsheet



- tracking income from prayer cloths, vials of oils, books, and spiritual healings, sold at inflated prices.
- There is the church with facilities and assets to help in ministry,
 - like the luxury car, house and jet for its wealthy ministers to do their work.
- And there is that church that put funerals on its calendar
 - and organizes carpools so its members can show up and yell hateful things at those who mourn while holding up their hateful signs.

That's the problem. To speak of church is not to speak of something that by the church, in and of itself,

- is to be praised or condemned,
- to join or avoid.

And being human, any church can have their best and worst moments.

- Friends can have your back,
 - except when they don't.
- A family can be loving,
 - except when it isn't.
- Neighborhoods can be safe,
 - unless they aren't.
- Nations can serve the people,
 - except when they serve only some.
- And churches can bear witness to the grace of God,
 - except for those times when their witness is of hate or harm.

But here's the thing—and this is going to sound completely illogical given everything that I just said. When our theological and biblical tradition describes the church as the “body of Christ”, the tradition is saying when Jesus looks at the church, he sees a *perfect reflection* of himself.

I know what I said sounds wrong, but I am going to say it again. ***When Jesus looks at the church, he sees a perfect reflection of himself.***

The church I am talking about is not the Church Visible but the Church Invisible. That is what is meant when Jesus says, “**When two or more are gathered in my name, I am with you.**” When two or more people—

- whether in a family or among friends,
- in the work of a for profit business or a non-profit organization,
- within a study group or prayer group,
- within the work of a charity or the life of a faith community,



- within government—

when two or more people are about the business of God, the Invisible Church is happening.

Let's remember what Jesus said before he makes this statement that “**when two or more people are gathered in my name.**” At the beginning of chapter 18, Jesus calls out those who harm vulnerable people in the name of God. He says it would be better to have a millstone tied around your neck than abuse little ones—which isn't children, though children are included, but is any who are vulnerable. Thus, it is better to have a millstone around your own neck than

- fleece the elderly,
- play on fear to get money,
- or hate to get members,
- or be a predator of others.

Sometimes churches do that, and you hear stories of those who have left the church because of the harm done to them. When churches do that, calling on the name of Christ doesn't help. Tie a millstone around that church's neck

But then Jesus talks about the promise. He talks about the hard work of reconciliation. He gives examples. He says that if someone sins against you, work it out with that person. Get someone else involved if that doesn't work out—a mutual friend, mediator, counselor. He goes from there even to the point of setting a strong boundary and says walk away if trying to heal things only makes it worse.

And that's when he says, “**Where two or more are gathered in my name, I am with you.**” I will expand that. When God sees the church that only God can see, it is never one person standing alone. It is always two or more gathered to be about what Jesus was about, beginning with healing the wounds of the world. When any Christ—like witness is made—

- like worshipping God,
- learning from those with holy wisdom,
- selflessly loving and serving others,
- doing the work of compassion, being humble and kind,

Jesus is present and church is happening.

Can you see the distinction between the Church Visible and the Church Invisible? And can you see that a visible church can be like the choreography of dance or the pruning of bonsai trees. Just as good choreography can be the elevation of movement and good gardening can be the celebration of gardening, a healthy church that organizes itself to bear imperfect witness to Christ can be a celebration of that true, invisible Church, seen only by God.



This distinction between the Church Seen and Unseen does two things in regard to organized church bodies—the institution of a church, if you will.

1. It sets limits on what organized churches can claim. Any power claim- like you have to be a member of a certain to be saved- cannot be sustained. And, when an organized church acts in ways that are not in keeping with the way of Christ, they cannot be excused just because Jesus' name is used or a cross is on the steeple. I would say that can be almost completely true of toxic cults but is partially true of all organized congregations... *even the best of them.*
2. The distinction also validates what organized faith communities do. It validates people wanting to know and follow Jesus finding others who want to know and follow Jesus. It validates the one thing God wants us to do and that is form visible expressions of an invisible grace. The visible church *can* be an expression of Christ's body. It *can point beyond itself* to that real-in-the-world but invisible reality that is the connection of people seeking to love and serve in ways that Jesus loved and served.

Because I am an ordained minister who serves an organized church, I take seriously those who criticize the church or speak of their own pain because of the church. Doing so, I think, helps keep me, and through me, the church I serve honest and humble about what we can be- an imperfect, human community that is trying to bear witness to Christ. But, at the end of the day, I always go back to a simple realization that keeps me grounded in the hope I have for the church. It is in the imperfect congregations of my life, the congregations that nurtured me as a child and the congregations that I have served as an adult, where I have most clearly seen Jesus. The reflection may not be as clear as what Jesus sees when he looks at the Invisible Church and sees his perfect reflection. But it is there:

- the grace that accepts us,
- the expectations that guide us,
- and the opportunities given us to love others as we have been loved.

It is the organized expression of what a church hopes to be: a Body of Christ in the world.²

² Dander: laobc, Bosai image: Getty Images/iStockphoto

