

CONJECTURES OF A SUMMER OBSERVER¹
Matthew 18: 15-20
A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens
September 4, 2011

What a summer to observe! In June all of New England was awash in celebration over the Bruins winning the Stanley Cup. By the end of the summer all of New England was awash in water from a storm named Irene. In between we worked; we laughed; we cried; we played; we studied; we went to church; we visited friends and family; we missed those who were gone; we did the things that come with the summer months.

I

That said, I want to make some observations. The first has to do with the last thing Jesus says in our gospel reading for today: *For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.* I want to remind you of that reality because it makes all the difference in the world. And if you read the verses just preceding that statement, you realize that Jesus said it in the context of hard times and conflict.

These are hard times for most people and most churches, yet the living Christ is with us. Our identity comes not from any label on our church sign out front, not from our long and distinguished history as a leading church in

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Worcester, not from any achievements of individual members—but from the presence of the living Christ among us. No matter how difficult the road we travel, or how unexpectedly we are ambushed by heartbreak or problems or surprises, we can travel into the future knowing that we are not alone. As the psalmist put it: *The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.*²

II

This leads to a second observation: the church is a place where hard issues can be dealt with gracefully. I use that word “gracefully” on purpose because it best describes the result of being aware of Christ’s presence with us.

That awareness does not mean that there will be no difficult decisions to make, no conflicts, no challenges. In fact, Jesus was addressing his followers in the context of difficulty. *If another member of the church sins against you...* he says. And what do you think he will advise?

If you get hurt by something someone says, or doesn’t say, or irritated by someone’s personality, or resentful of someone’s attitude....just talk about them in the parking lot after a meeting! *If another member of the church sins against you....*get on the phone and complain about them, or send them a nasty email and copy the pastor. *If another member of the church sins against*

² Psalm 46: 7.

you...un-friend them on Facebook! Avoid them on Sundays, sit as far away from them as you can, and refuse to take communion with them!

No, that is not his advice. Like his own relationship with his disciples, Jesus advises a graceful resolution to the conflict. Go and talk to the person directly, one on one. This way you are not dragging the offending party through the mud. If the problem gets worked out, no one else needs to know about it. Forgiveness and reconciliation takes place privately. There is no trash talk, no humiliation, no scandal. And if that doesn't work, you bring another person or two with you. That expands the number of people aware of the problem, but still it is graceful.

But then he says that if nothing else works, you bring it before the whole congregation. And if that doesn't work, if there is no reconciliation, his advice is to let that person be to you as a *Gentile and a tax collector*. Yet even that is graceful, for the early church did not treat Gentiles and tax collectors with contempt, as some did. They were polite; they were courteous; they were respectful of Gentiles and tax collectors.

In a culture filled with harsh words and extreme rhetoric, it is often surprising to those outside the church to discover that many churches are filled with people who relate gracefully to one another. This is what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote, *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not*

*envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in truth.*³

This way of relating gracefully is a treasure to be guarded by our church.

III

One final observation: the church deals with affairs that are what English playwright Christopher Fry called “soul-size.” Listen to his poetic description of his time:

Thank God our time is now when wrong
Comes up to face us everywhere,
Never to leave us till we take
The longest stride of soul we ever took.
Affairs are now soul size.
The enterprise
Is exploration into God.⁴

I suspect that the challenges facing the church in our day will call for “the longest stride of soul we ever took.” Our affairs are not petty; they are not trivial; they are not inconsequential. They are, in fact, soul-size.

Deep down I think we all realize this. Now is not a time for the church to play trivial pursuit! We are engaged in matters soul-size. We traffic in soul-size questions and soul-size truth. This is not a time to peddle quick and easy

³ I Corinthians 13: 4-6.

⁴ From Christopher Fry, “A Sleep of Prisoners.” Quoted in Paul Scherer, *The Word God Sent* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 111.

answers; it is a time to travel together in faith even when all the answers are not evident.

IV

I want to leave you with an image. It comes from Celtic Christianity. In the year 635 AD, the King of Northumbria on the northeast coast of England requested the monks of Iona off the coast of Scotland, to send a missionary to his realm. Eventually a monk named Aiden came and established a ministry in a place called Lindisfarne. Twice a day the tides in their ebb and flow surround Lindisfarne, making it a temporary island.

Lindisfarne became a place of spiritual retreat, separated from the mainland yet joined to it. Separated but accessible, connected to the larger community but at the same time cut off from it twice a day. In the church at Lindisfarne they would meet God for the sake of those on the mainland.

Surely we have here an image of the church. Here on Sundays we come to worship, connected to the world but also separated from it. We come here on behalf of ourselves because we need a place of retreat and growth, but we come here also in behalf of the world that we believe God loves. We come here in retreat from the mainland with the understanding that we keep the mainland in sight and accessible.

Our task is soul-size, our vision for the world is one of peace and justice for all. Our companions along the journey are all kinds of people, and the promise that sustains us is profound: *For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*

I invite you to invest your best efforts in this great, soul-size adventure. This is not a perfect church; it is rather a perfectly human church in touch with the divine.

V

We have an important road to travel; we have God's presence with us; we have wonderful travel companions; we have nourishment for the way. What a great time to be church!