

Sermon for Gathering Sunday September 7, 2014
Romans 13:8-14, Matt. 18:15-20

Why we Gather: An Ecclesiological Top Ten¹

Gathering Sunday. It is good to be together.

But do we very often think about how good? Sometimes we do.

Sometimes we come here and connect in just the ways we need.

You might find after a Sunday morning:

that you were nourished

that you connected with someone in just the way you needed to

that you gave someone the gift of a listening presence

that you received a word of comfort or encouragement

that you might have been challenged by someone's words or actions to

examine your own life more closely

or you might even have had an encounter with the living presence of

God – through song, prayer, word or action...

And sometimes you may not have had any of the above named

experiences, but you came anyway and you plan to come again next

week and the week following because, that's also church, it is what you

do, what you have committed yourself to do.

I'm presuming this morning that Gathering Sunday is a good Sunday to

examine why we come to this building every Sunday morning or

certainly as many Sunday morning as we can.

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Why do we gather?

Matthew 18 and Romans 13:8-14 will guide my response to this question.

We heard read for us part of Matthew 18, but as I hope would be the choice of many good Mennonite pastors and preachers I will take the whole of Matthew 18 as my text for today and encourage you to browse through it as I preach (there are several copies of bibles at the back and the ushers have a few copies if you would like one)

This text has been preached frequently in Mennonite circles because traditionally we have taken very seriously Jesus' teachings on how to be church, or in Greek, the ecclesia, the gathering of God's people. During our summer preaching series, John Rempel introduced us to Pilgrim Marpeck's life and writing and his early Anabaptist struggle with what it meant in very practical terms to live faithfully as the gathered people of God.

This chapter, Matthew 18, is the fourth of five discourses sometimes called sermons of Jesus in this gospel and is particularly relevant for helping us understand what it means to gather, including the challenging social implications of wanting to be part of the kingdom of heaven as Matthew would say or being part of the reign of God as we often say instead today. The reign of God is not by definition a place

where we get to hang out by ourselves. It is *a priori* a gathering, a whole new or at least constantly renewing social reality that encompasses those who have decided to follow Jesus and take seriously his teaching.

When we gather Sunday mornings and as we live in the awareness that being part of this communion or this congregation also shapes our lives beyond Sunday morning we are living within the social reality of God's reign.

As I examined Matthew 18 in this light lots of reasons for why we gather became apparent to me.

and as the number of those reasons climbed, I decided that the guiding structure for the rest of this sermon might helpfully be a Top Ten list.

It's been a very long time since I've stayed up late enough to enjoy David Letterman's top ten lists.... and if I were to watch any late night TV today, it would be Jon Stewart's daily show because I think he's the better preacher, but the top ten list sometimes provides a helpful place to hang ideas, so here it goes.

This Top Ten list is entitled
Why we Gather: An Ecclesiological Top Ten
starting at number 10

Number 10 (*slide 1*)

So the children among us can show us the way to greatness.

I see this one right there at the beginning of chapter 18. The disciples ask who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven and Jesus responds by placing before them the weakest and most vulnerable, the most open and humble and trusting, a child, and says – this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Change and become like this one and whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. On Gathering Sunday (and beyond I hope) we rejoice that this is one of the places that we gather as young and middle and older together. When we gather in this way the humble, trusting, open and vulnerable ones among us, usually the children, but others as well – will show us the way to go.

Number 9 (*slide 2*)

We gather to identify and avoid stumbling blocks

Glance at those next sentences in Matthew. When we are focused on our day to day public and market place pursuits, where we work for a living, run children around to school and events, try to gather as a family at least for meals or bedtime routines, and just all around busy ourselves with the tasks of daily living, we don't have much time to pause and think about the things that we might be tripping over or causing others to trip over. Here we pause to think about those things. I'm not sure that Jesus could stress this point more strongly. We need to identify our stumbling blocks, and ask ourselves, "what are we putting in the way of the vulnerable ones who are trying to find their way into the reign of

God?” Is it our misplaced priorities, addictions, general all around aptitude for sin that gets in the way? Sin is everything in our lives, words deeds and undone deeds, that break the bonds of our relationships with self, God, others and creation. We desperately need a time and place and community where we can identify and help each other with these things – or as Jesus so harshly says we might as well fasten a millstone around our necks and walk out into the lake, or cut off our offending hand or foot or pluck out the offending eye? These are harsh words, yes, but harsh words to make a point. We have serious work to do here – and it is one of the reasons we gather.

Number 8 (*slide 3*)

We gather to be the ninety-nine.

The next part of Matthew 18 tells a story about 100 sheep and one who goes astray and how the shepherd will leave the ninety-nine to go and bring back that one. When the lost sheep is found Jesus says, that your Father in heaven rejoices more over that one than the ninety-nine that never went astray. So, we stay here and gather here on a regular bases not so that the Father has less to rejoice about, but because the great shepherd desires that not one of us be lost.

I have three sons and I was extremely grateful that when we went on outings when they were small, at least two of them liked to remain part of our little family group. One of my three sons thought that wandering about and losing us, wasn't really a big deal because he never really felt lost – it was we the ones who remained who occasionally lost track of

him because of his propensity to wander, and it was those of us who stayed together who then felt anxious about him wandering off. If I can use this example to expand on Jesus' parable for a moment do we gather so that we can notice and be concerned about the ones who are missing? I realize that's not exactly what it says. We gather so that there is a flock to come back to for those who stray. Thanks be to God. The gathering of the whole flock the gathering of everyone into the reign of heaven is God's ultimate desire.

Number 7 (*slide 4*)

Be the shepherd's representatives.

As I've said in another sermon, this congregation is as much a flock of shepherds as it is a flock of sheep. We are a *priesthood of all believers* congregation and as such we become the great shepherd's representatives when we also seek to bring back those who have become lost. When we gather we have the opportunity to learn and hone our priestly and pastoral skills.

Number 6 (*slide 5*)

Learn the hard lessons of how to treat one another.

We heard these next verses read for us today and many of you are familiar with them. Verse 15 and following have for the most part helpfully provided a concrete foundation for step-by-step conflict transformation skills,

First, go to the one who has offended you.
and if that doesn't bring about reconciliation take one or two others along with you and if this still does not succeed in bringing about restoration, bring it to the ecclesia the gathering, so that it may be resolved in a larger context. There are ways that this can be done well and with compassion and there are ways that this can be done that lead to inappropriate shaming. Over the centuries we have had much to learn about the most helpful way of carrying out Jesus' directive for the church in these verses. For example, the verse that says we should treat the offender, if this can be determined, as a Gentile and a tax collector is as far as I know the bases for the tradition of shunning or the bann from participation in aspects of the community so that there might be no spot or wrinkle, so that the gathering might remain pure. Today, we are less strict about these steps, and more nuanced in our interpretations of these verses but let it be noted that our gathering does have an important responsibility as part of the reign of God on earth to actively pursue God's desire for restoration and reconciliation for everyone.

Number 5 (*slide 6*)

In this gathering we also have a responsibility to bind and loose things. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

For many years I was puzzled by this verse, but it was Rudy Baergen at a workshop at the Vancouver Mennonite Church Canada assembly who helped me understand that every time we sort our way through to the other side of an ethical dilemma we are binding or loosing something to

the laws or will or desire of God. There are very few situations where only one of God's laws or commandments or desires applies. When we ask ourselves what is the good and just and loving way to proceed, we may find we need to bind ourselves to one good thing and loose ourselves from another sometimes equally as good sometimes only slightly better, but we make a choice.

Roman's 13 reminds us that compassion is the end requirement of the law, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. *I struggled to come up with an example for this one.*

Both compassion and justice are helpful for knowing when we must bind to or when we must loose from what may seem like clear directives in scripture. We gather so that we might take seriously this responsibility.

Number 4 (*slide 7*)

We gather to immerse ourselves in the teachings of Jesus.

It is in this gathering that we have disciplined ourselves to hear the Word of God preached and sung so that we may be reminded how to live. When we gather, we hear again the stories that shape us. We hear the stories of Jesus' life and we repeat the stories that he told.

Immersion in the stories and teachings of Jesus and the rest of the Bible for that matter continue to transform our lives in an ongoing way.

Number 3 (*slide 8*)

We gather to learn the way of compassion and forgiveness.

I don't need to expand much on this one. It is straightforward and already covered in some ways in number 5 and 4 above. For compassion is the fulfillment of the law according to Paul in the letter to the Romans. and it is the centre of Christ's teaching based on the gift of God's covenantal law.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart soul, mind and strength and your neighbour as yourself.

And when asked how many times we should forgive, Jesus responds in two ways with a teaching – you must forgive seventy-seven times and with the parable of the forgiving king and the unforgiving slave here in Matt. 18.

As well Jesus makes this point in the prayer that he taught. In the Lord's Prayer we ask that God will forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

When we gather and repeat the Lord's prayer together we commit to work with God towards the coming of God's reign of compassion and forgiveness.

Number 2. *(slide 9)*

We gather so that we might intercede on behalf of others and ourselves to God in prayer. We gather to pray. We gather to ask God for things.

And here and elsewhere in the gospels we are assured that when we pray together God hears and answers our prayers...

Because

and this leads to the number 1 reason we gather (*slide 10*)

Because where two or three or 125 or so are gathered in my name, I am there among them. Jesus promises to be among us when we gather.

Let's sit with that thought for a moment.

Jesus says, "where two or three are gathered, I am there among them."

If Jesus' presence on earth is made real and palpable among us then

here

today

and every time we gather

the world still has an opportunity to see and experience

the transformative love of God through this (the church that gathers in his name).

Thanks be to God, Amen

10. Change and become like the children among us
9. Identify and avoid stumbling blocks
8. Be the ninety-nine
7. Be the shepherd's representatives
6. Learn the hard lessons of how to treat one another

5. Bind and Loose (all that is written is a great example or a terrible warning)
4. Immerse ourselves in the teachings of Jesus
3. Practice the way of compassion and forgiveness
2. Ask God for things
1. Embody the presence of Jesus in and for the world