

Congress is stuck, the job market is stuck, America's war in Afghanistan is stuck – largely because we can't seem to agree. We can't agree on solutions, but more importantly, we can't agree on the bottom line – on the values we hold true – which Paul and Jesus claim must be awareness of our need for God and selfless love for one another. "Love is the fulfilling of the law," says Paul, or as Jesus says of our covenant/of agreement rooted in God, "If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

It's a powerful promise of God's presence, but a reminder, too, of ours; for without us – without our agreement and cooperation – we will miss God's prize of love. We will miss awareness of the part that sin plays in our brokenness, and holy expectation of the part that Jesus shares in changing it. We'll miss – or risk – God's plan for wholeness of life. And yet together with God – in partnership with the Living Christ – we can know life's fullness and create a world of harmony – a symphony, if you will – where no one feels excluded and where conflicts are lovingly resolved, even without a genie. *Amen.*



A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church,
Oak Park, IL on the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost,
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Jesus said, "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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."
Matthew 18:20

I wonder if most of us – gathered together In God's name on this Labor Day Weekend – really think of Jesus here among us. Do we sense him near us in church, for example, or walking with us in daily life; and if so, does this awareness stir us to live differently? Clearly, Jesus says that he is with us, promising in today's Gospel, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." We certainly have that many here, even on *this* particular weekend, and yet do we believe Christ's promise of presence?

Or put another way, do we come to church today – or for that matter, to any day of our week – in holy expectation that God will show up and transform the world of sin and brokenness in which we live? It sounds too good to be true, and yet all of today's readings affirm not just the presence of the Living God among us, but our great need for God in a world where sin is a formidable foe. The psalmist, for instance, sees God in the Law, working as a force against sin. Paul and Jesus, on the other hand, see love as God's true antidote to human sin and brokenness that try to subjugate God's plan.

They try to cheat us out of God's prize for wholeness of life, reminding us – as some of you have heard me say before – that the word for "sin" that's used most often in the New Testament, comes from a archery term that means in Greek "to miss the mark, and so not share in the prize." The prize is love that leads to wholeness, and so Paul preaches, "Love your neighbor as yourself . . . (for) love is the fulfilling of the law." Similarly, Jesus says, agree with one another, adding that "if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven."

Agreement –from the Greek word “symphonic,” meaning to sound together or to be in accord – is what it takes to live in community and in the world. It’s what it takes to tame self-will run riot, the “my-way or the-highway” thinking that pervades the world, including – and I know this will shock some of you – the church. Sin is as much a part of church community as it is of life, and so both Paul and Jesus tell us what to do when sin occurs. “*If* another member of the church sins against you,” Jesus says, “go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone,” although he might as well have said, “*When* someone sins.”

Sin is inevitable after all, as the Rev. Martin Smith – who was once charged with speaking to new students at Episcopal Divinity School – used to say. Addressing starry-eyed seminarians he’d begin, “Now one of the things you will get involved in (at seminary) during this year is a lot of sinning.” The students would laugh, but Martin would go on in all seriousness to tell them that living in community is fertile ground for “complicated relationships involving selfishness, self-delusion, deceit, sexual gratification, and not so carefully disguised hatred.”

Sadly, this can be particularly true in the church, as revealed in the story about a woman who stumbled on a bottle while walking along the beach. Picking it up, she gently rubbed the bottle until – low-and-behold – a genie appeared! Astonished, the woman asked the genie if she got three wishes, but he replied dismissively that this was an old-wives tale, and that she only got one. “What’ll it be?” he asked impatiently, and the woman answered without hesitation, “I want peace in the Middle East.”

Pulling out a map, she pointed and said, “I want these countries to stop fighting with each other and I want all the Arabs to love the Jews and vice-versa.” The genie snapped back, “Look lady, be reasonable. These countries have been fighting for thousands of years, and I’ve been in this bottle for five hundred. I’m I’m out of shape, and although I’m good, I’m not *THAT* good! It can’t be done. Make another wish . . . and please, be reasonable.”

She thought for a minute and said, “Well, I’ve never been able to find the right church – one where everyone is kind and focused on others; one where people like to help out, and no one feels excluded; where people resolve conflicts lovingly, and don’t complain about trivial things. A church without conflict –that’s my second wish.” The genie sighed. “Show me that map again,” he said.

Church is no different than the world when it comes to sin, and yet Jesus *WANTS* it to be different. He wants *US* to reveal God’s love, and so tells us to bring our sins – including our complaints against each other – out into the open. He knows we’ll have them, but rather than harboring them in our hearts, Jesus urges openness. Why? Because to keep to ourselves the hurts, anger, or resentments – which we all have at one time or another – is to allow them to fester until they infect not only our lives but the life of the whole community.

“Bring your complaints out into the open where there’s a possibility of transformation,” says Jesus, adding, “and if need be, bring other members of the church into the mix.” What he means is that another member can help keep things honest. What he does *NOT* mean is, “Go to one member of the church and complain about another behind her back.” He doesn’t mean, “Gather sympathetic supporters as judge and jury testifying to the ways that *they* were also wronged.” He doesn’t mean, “Vilify someone who has no idea that he or she has wronged anyone.” Rather, Jesus means that we’re to be direct and honest with each other when things go wrong, so that sin can be confronted, owned, and ultimately forgiven and transformed.

Only then is the community set right again, and only *WE* – in partnership with God – can do it. Of course, this is easier said than done, since we can get attached to our resentments, thinking, “If I stay angry, I can protect myself and not get burned again.” We think, “If I just cling to hurt and plot with others, maybe *they’ll* get hurt.” We might even think, “Maybe I’m the one who’s wrong, or oversensitive, or too judgmental.” But whatever the case, such thinking keeps us stuck. What’s more, it can keep community stuck – whether family, church, government, or the world – as we see all too clearly in today’s news.