

# SUMMER

## SERMON SERIES 2020



Evangelical Lutheran  
Church in Canada  
*In Mission for Others*

Sunday, September 6, 2020

**Rev. Dr. Larry Kochendorfer**

Bishop, Synod of Alberta and the Territories

*Matthew 18: 15–20*

Welcome to this sermon series that our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is providing for congregations throughout the summer months and into September. I am Larry Kochendorfer and I serve as the Bishop of the Synod of Alberta and the Territories. It is great to be with you this Sunday.

As I prepared for today's brief sermon I want to acknowledge my appreciation for the writings of The Rev. Dr. David Lose who currently serves as Senior Pastor at Mount Olivet Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, and The Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis, professor at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. I have significantly borrowed their wisdom and insights, and their words, in the shaping of today's sermon.

Let us pray: *God of grace and mercy, enliven and strengthen each faith community with the promise of your presence, in Jesus' name.*

We begin today by singing a simple text and beautiful melody, used with permission of the composer, Bruce Harding. "Where Two or Three Are Gathered" was written as a gathering song for Sunday worship during the 2002 Easter season, using the text of Matthew 18:20.

The text of the song is very simple: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there, I am there." Please join me in singing as you become familiar with the text and

melody (or use the following link to see composer, Bruce, and Cheryl Harding singing the song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26xik5R19j0>).

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there, I am there.” These words seem particularly poignant in our COVID-19 pandemic reality. A word for our present experience where many are gathered in twos or threes, as families, as cohort units, as bubbles. A word of promise, for this time, that Jesus is with us, “I am there.”

This word is good news for us this long weekend, in our present reality. It is good news proclaimed elsewhere in this gospel according to Matthew, too. At Jesus’ birth, the child is to be named Emmanuel, which means, “God with us.” And the final words of this Gospel proclaim a similar promise, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

As we enter today’s reading mindful of this good news, of Jesus’ promise: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them....” I wonder if we hear today’s reading as about rules or as about relationships? Are we here being given rules to live by or are we being invited to consider relationships over, well, over just about everything else in our life as followers of Jesus?

I have most often understood this reading as about rules. Maybe you have, too. Rules quoted in constitutions or bylaws about how we are to maintain order in the Christian community. I have heard them used by those who are more than eager to “go and point out the fault” of another. They have often been cited as a way of handling disputes and then used as a rationale of why someone should be shunned.

If this reading is about rules it is rather simple and straightforward: if someone offends you, confront them. If that does not work, try an intervention. If that fails, cut them off and toss them out. Excommunicate, exile, shake off the dust from one’s feet, wash one’s hands of the person, and move on.

But what if this reading is not about rules, but about relationships? What if it is not about providing simple and straightforward instructions, but about the never simple and often complicated work of building authentic Christian community? What if the intention here is

not about systems or procedures or a rulebook to follow, but more about reconciling and restoring to the community a sister or a brother, a sibling in Christ? And what if this gospel writer's primary concern is not actually about settling disputes within the community of faith, but about creating a space, environment, room, opportunity where Jesus' presence, where two or three gathered, is able to bring forgiveness, healing, joy, hope, and life?

Let us briefly look at the context of today's reading. The verses immediately before tell of the shepherd's delight in restoring to the flock a sheep that has strayed and the command to beware despising others, even those who seem of little importance. And the verses that follow set a new standard for forgiveness, first multiplying Peter's sense of appropriate forgiveness beyond imagination: "not seven times, but...seventy-seven times," and then suggesting that our ability to forgive others may be the key as to whether we ourselves are forgiven.

Preceded by the story of the lost sheep and followed by a new standard for forgiveness, today's reading, seen in its context, is about relationships, about community, about reconciliation and restoration. It is offered by someone who knows that relationships take work to maintain and that community is much more difficult to create and nurture than we might imagine. That working out conflict and disputes as a community together rather than simply declaring judgement can be very, very hard.

Jesus urges those in the faith community to have honest conversation in private with the offending party. No passive-aggressive behavior, no "triangulation," just straightforward conversation. This is so hard, I would rather complain to others about the one who has offended me than to talk to the offending person, but Jesus leaves no room for such behavior.

If the offending member refuses to listen, Jesus advises bringing along one or two others as witnesses for further conversation. And if the member still refuses to listen, the matter may be brought before the whole community. And if the member refuses to listen to the whole assembly of the faithful, then and only then is the member to be treated "as a Gentile and a tax collector."

Even here, dear friends, in the context of the Gospel according to Matthew, a Gentile or a tax collector is not someone who is beyond the reach of God's mercy, for throughout this Gospel Jesus makes a point of reaching out to the Gentiles and tax collectors. Religious leaders were outraged that at every opportunity Jesus extended himself graciously to them, even eating and drinking with them. He was known as a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 11:19).

Again, it is about relationships, about reconciliation and restoration, about forgiveness, healing, joy, hope, and life in community. And if it becomes necessary to exclude someone from the faith community for the sake of the integrity and well-being of the community, this is never a final judgment.

A community shaped by Jesus, by his life, message and cross, is a community always seeking to reconcile and to restore.

Make no mistake, the work of seeking authentic community, where two or three are gathered, is hard. But also, powerful. And healing. And, an incredible witness. It is difficult, it is challenging, to be sure, but also worth it. Always.

And when we grow weary following the path Jesus set, let us remind one another of the good news, that we have Jesus' promise that each and every time we try, where two or three are gathered, he is there with us – instructing us in the way of love, urging us on, forgiving us, and sending us to be a people, a community, of reconciliation and restoration, accompanying us wherever we may go.

Join me in singing: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there, I am there."

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Where Two or Three are Gathered. Used with permission of Bruce Harding. Words: Matthew 18:20. Music copyright © 2002 by Bruce Harding. Evensong Worship Resources, [www.evensong.ca](http://www.evensong.ca) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26xik5R19j0>)

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"What Kind of Community Will We Be?" Sunday, August 28, 2011 David Lose  
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1601>

"Christian Community." September 6, 2017 David Lose  
<http://www.davidlose.net/2017/09/pentecost-14-a-christian-community/>

"God Is With Us." September 3, 2017 Karoline Lewis  
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4961>