

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Today we are called to community. Jesus says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt. 18:20). In these Sundays after Pentecost, we are repeatedly reminded that God has not abandoned us and that Christ’s resurrection and ascension are a beginning for us, not an end.

In this time of pandemic, as impatience and frustrations grow each day, the questions that follows are, “How do we be community right now? How are we gathered when we can’t gather?”

The readings this week focus on the practical work of the gathered Christian community: turning from sin to repentance, from conflict to reconciliation. These are things we can do even without being physically gathered at 3100 North Saint Louis Avenue in Joplin. Indeed, these are things perhaps best achieved outside that building – like we are now. Certainly, they are things in which God is with us no matter where and how we connect with this world.

Maybe it helps to remembers this: When the church does gather as God’s assembly, we do not gather as a social club, drawn and kept together only by shared demographics and interests. We are more than like-minded individuals living in the same neighborhood or sharing a similar age or background or status. If church is only a social club, then there is no reason to continue to gather when conflict arises, when uncomfortable issues are raised, or when “the way it’s always been” begins to change. If church is only a social club, there is no reason to journey with God through the wilderness and do the hard work of reconciliation and forgiveness and being led to new life.

God calls us into community knowing that being in community is hard. And, in these days right now, it’s especially hard. Your church council, the synod council, and the bishop recognize and struggle themselves with that each week and each day. If you are feeling challenged in this time, know that you are not alone!

Scripture brings us practical guidance for gathering through good and hard times. The Holy Spirit is always at work—in, through, and among us—to gather and regather us anew. Right now, that same Spirit is with and within you. Listen for the patience the Spirit is bringing to you. Anticipate the community that God is even now creating anew. Hold fast to the call to love your neighbor. Let these words of worship and liturgy that we share right now be our connection. Through God’s Word, we are always two and three and more. We are never alone. We are God’s gathered children.

Let Us Be Gathered

Confession and Forgiveness

Blessed be the holy Trinity, † one God,
who creates, redeems, and sustains us and all of creation.
Amen.

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God.
Silence is kept for reflection.

Faithful God,
have mercy on us.
We confess that we are captive to sin
and cannot free ourselves.
We turn from your loving embrace
and go our own ways.
We pass judgment on one another

before examining ourselves.
We place our own needs before those of our neighbors.
We keep your gift of salvation to ourselves.
Make us humble, cast away our transgressions,
and turn us again to life in you
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

God hears the cries of all who call out in need,
and through his death and resurrection,
Christ has made us his own.
Hear the truth that God proclaims:
Your sins are forgiven in the name of † Jesus Christ.
Led by the Holy Spirit, live in freedom and newness
to do God's work in the world.
Amen.

Gathering Song

We are gathered today in the song "Built on a Rock" (ELW #652). Christus Victor Lutheran Church in Columbia, South Carolina, provides us with music leadership.

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/GsHGOpvIC84>. (Words are included in the video.)

Prayer of the Day

Let us pray.

O Lord God, enliven and preserve your church with your perpetual mercy.
Without your help, we mortals will fail;
remove far from us everything that is harmful,
and lead us toward all that gives life and salvation,
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

Let Us Hear God's Word

A reading from Ezekiel:

⁷So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. ⁸If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. ⁹But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

¹⁰Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" ¹¹Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33)

*The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.*

A reading from the Psalms:

- ³³Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,
and I shall keep it to the end.
³⁴Give me understanding, and I shall keep your teaching;
I shall keep it with all my heart.
³⁵Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for that is my desire.
³⁶Incline my heart to your decrees
and not to unjust gain.
³⁷Turn my eyes from be- holding falsehood;
give me life in your way.
³⁸Fulfill your promise to your servant,
which is for those who fear you.
³⁹Turn away the reproach that I dread,
because your judgments are good.
⁴⁰Behold, I long for your commandments;
by your righteousness enliven me.

A reading from Romans:

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13)

*Word of God. Word of life.
Thanks be to God.*

*The holy gospel according to Matthew.
Glory to you, O Lord.*

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹⁵“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If the member 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. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, 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. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Matthew 18)

*The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.*

Reflection on the Readings

Whenever two or more are gathered...it can be really hard to get along.

It is not only COVID-19, with its threat to physical bodies and emotional well-being, but also the deadly viruses of systemic racism, sexism, ageism, and many other “isms” that divide, distort, and diminish human value while infecting our communities.

Conflicts fester and explode thanks to fear or misplaced loyalty, and people talk more *about* one another than they talk *with* one another. It is extremely tempting to throw our hands in the air and give up on one another, give up on our congregation, give up on the ELCA—give up on our cities, our schools and universities, our states, our elections, our nation, our world.

Much of Jesus' teaching in Matthew makes the prospects seem even more challenging. As early as the Sermon on the Mount (remember way back in Lent when Vicky started to lead our Wednesday evening worship in this teaching?), his breakthrough public appearance in Matthew's account, Jesus spells out a series of virtually unattainable expectations for those who are being "trained for the kingdom of heaven." If you are angry with your brothers and sisters, you will be liable to judgment (Matthew 5:22). If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away (5:29). Do not resist an evildoer (5:39). Love your enemies (5:44). Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (5:48).

Jesus sets the bar high and does not let his followers off the accountability hook. But his pledge to be present with them through whatever comes is a promise that empowers them to live into their calling.

Listening in today's world, we can hear Jesus' teaching as a model for how we might walk alongside and protect those who are being disempowered or made vulnerable, enabling them to speak so that others might hear. His lesson focuses our attention on those who face the larger risks, or have the least power and the most to lose, or who find themselves to be in a dangerous or vulnerable situation—often through no fault of their own. Jesus speaks to a value of community responsibility. It is a value that Paul then echoes and reinforces in his letter to the Romans when he emphasizes a command to love your neighbor as yourself.

For many people, it is easier to identify the ways they have been harmed than it is to recognize the ways their actions can harm others, even if unintentionally.

Maybe you yourself have felt harmed during this pandemic? Perhaps you have even felt an inability to gather for worship like we used to do as being personally harmful? (Maybe even more so when it seems like so many other churches are gathering for in-person worship?) It is always easier to see the problems from our own point of view.

Less easier to see are the needs and issues experienced by others—especially when our divided world is led in so many different directions and it is difficult to separate information from disinformation from misinformation. Perhaps one of the most difficult truths of today's gospel reading is a reminder of the human capacity to cause harm to others—both in the systems in which we participate as well as in our personal actions (or failures to act).

Jesus promises not to desert his disciples as they face that difficult truth and practice living more fully into the communities that God calls into being—in whatever new and as yet unknown forms they may take. After all, Jesus is present wherever two or three are gathered in his name, a name that means "God with us," who saves people from their sins. The power for his followers to be transformed is available for the asking, as promised. "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" (Matthew 18:19).

Hymn of the Day

"Draw Us in the Spirit's Tether" (ELW #470) is a hymn that celebrates Christ's presence among us. Embedded within the hymn is a prayer that we may make our meals and living as a sacrament by caring, helping, and giving. How appropriate for these days! Modeling the ways in which we now meet together, the choirs of St. Andrew Episcopal Church and Hope Lutheran Church in College Park, Maryland, gather virtually to lead us in song.

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/Ht-8yS5hm1c>.

- 1 *Draw us in the Spirit's tether,
for when humbly in your name
two or three are met together,
you are in the midst of them.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Touch we now your garment's hem.*

- 2 *As disciples used to gather
in the name of Christ to sup,
then with thanks to God the giver
break the bread and bless the cup,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
so now bind our friendship up.*

- 3 *All our meals and all our living
make as sacraments of you,
that by caring, helping, giving,
we may be disciples true.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
We will serve with faith anew.*

Prayers of Intercession

Drawn together by the compassion of God, we pray for the church, the world, and all those in need, responding to each petition with the words "Hear us and help us."

Unite your church, O God. Give to all the baptized the gifts of repentance and reconciliation. Strengthen ecumenical partnerships and interracial cooperation among the churches. Guide the work of the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches.

A brief silence.

O God, Leader of the church, in your mercy, hear us and help us.

Protect your creation, O God. Teach us ways to live that do not harm what you have entrusted to our care. Give to the animals the habitat they need for life. Renew and enliven places suffering from drought, flood, storms, or pollution.

A brief silence.

O God, Creator of the earth, in your mercy, hear us and help us.

Bless the nations, O God. Frustrate the designs of dictators. Give to the military a clear and moral purpose. Guide legislators, civil servants, judges, and police toward the well-being of all. Infuse the coming election season with honesty and integrity.

A brief silence.

O God, Governor of the world, in your mercy, hear us and help us.

Sustain us in our work, O God, and give employment to those who need it. Shape societies to ensure fair treatment for all who labor. Help us to love our neighbors in and through our work.

A brief silence.

O God, Guardian of all peoples, in your mercy, hear us and help us.

Guide our civil discourse, O God. Alert us to social evils and show our nation how to end the patterns of racial injustice. Accompany all are endeavoring to bring about a renewed society. Curb the violence in our cities.

A brief silence.

O God, Haven of righteousness, in your mercy, hear us and help us.

Tend to all in need, O God. Assist all friends and family members who are seeking restored relationships. Give community to the lonely and welcome to the outcast. Shelter all who are vulnerable in body, mind, or spirit, especially Mary and her parents, Carolyn, Marsha, Martha, Pat, Valetta, Paul, Vallie, LaVaune, Kathy, Frank, Lisa, Rita, April, Bev, Bob, Beth, Marlene, those we name here before you.

A brief silence.

O God, Physician of the sick, in your mercy, hear us and help us.

Receive once again, O God, our plea for the end of the coronavirus. Comfort those afflicted with COVID-19 and uphold our medical workers. Give youth a sense of responsibility for others. Provide the world a vaccine.

A brief silence.

O God, Healer in times of plague, in your mercy, hear us and help us.

Hear each one of us, O God, as we pray now for ourselves.

A longer period of silence.

O God, Lover of us all, in your mercy, hear us and help us.

We remember with thanksgiving those who have died in faith. As you equipped them, equip us with your protection and power, until with them we see your salvation.

A brief silence.

O God, Eternal One, in your mercy, hear us and help us.

All these things and whatever else you see that we need, we entrust to your mercy; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Offering Prayer

Let us pray.

Blessed are you, O God, maker of all things.
You have set before us gifts of your good creation.
Prepare us for your heavenly banquet,
nourish us with rich food and drink,
and send us forth to set tables in the midst of a suffering world,
through the bread of life, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen.

Let Us Be Sent in Service

Sending Song

A wonderful new song released this year during this time of pandemic and that ties closely to today's gospel theme is "Together." The song is by the pop duo and contemporary gospel-singing Australian brothers (now based in Nashville) known as For King and Country. It also features vocal music from Kirk Franklin and Tori Kelly. "When we rise, we will rise together. Together." The "rise" of which they sing is, of course, the new life to which Christ raises us all each day.

Here is the video link: https://youtu.be/IR1Hk0FVi_k

Song Lyrics:

Oh oh oh oh oh

*This is for the busted hearts
This is for the question marks
This is for the outcast soul
Lost control, no one knows
Sing it for the can't-go-back
Sing it for the broken past
Sing it for the just found out
Life is now upside down*

*If you're looking for hope tonight, raise your hand
If you're feeling alone and don't understand
If you're fighting in the fight of your life, then stand
We're going to make it through this hand in hand*

*And if we fall, we will fall together
Together*

*This is for the second chance
This is for the new romance
Sing it for the loved in vain, overcame
It's not too late*

*If you're looking for hope tonight, raise your hand
If you're feeling alone and don't understand
If you're fighting in the fight of your life, then stand
We're going to make it through this hand in hand*

*And if we fall, we will fall together
Together
When we rise, we will rise together
Together*

*Ohhh ohhh ohhh ohhh
(We will rise together)*

*(Listen)
If you're looking for hope tonight
(And you're all alone)
If you're feeling alone tonight
(Can you feel)
If you're in the fight of your life
(I can promise)
We're gonna make it happen, yeah
I will be by your side
(By your side)
Cause love's in the air tonight
(Can you feel it)
Come up and see the light
Whenever ever ever
Just as long as we're together, say*

*If we fall, we will fall together
(I got you my brother)
Together
(I see you my sister)
When we rise, we will rise together
Together*

*If we fall, we will fall together
(Take my hand)
Together
(Help me stand)
When we rise, we will rise together
(We will rise together)
Together*

*Together we are dangerous
Together with our differences
Together we are bolder, braver, stronger*

Benediction

Mothering God,
Father, † Son, and Holy Spirit,
bless you and lead you into the way of truth and life.
Amen.