

“I Am There Among Them”

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Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵If 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.”

Prayer.

This past week has been a week of suffering. The juxtaposition of suffering has caused my emotions to run close to the surface, causing me to brush away a tear or two on numerous occasions. Locally, our whole parish has been aware and praying with Kathy & Carl Priest and family, as Kathy attends to her dying mother. On the Gulf coast, we are simply horrified by the overwhelming destruction, suffering and chaos of hurricane Katrina.

God has given us this morning a wonderful Gospel lesson that has been thoroughly dissected over the years. It is obvious to all but the casual observer. Reconciliation is vital, so make a systematic effort to reconcile your differences with those who hurt you. (There you go Ken: a one sentence sermon!). Today is a rare occasion when it is more important to preach about the topical events of the day and to allow the Gospel to stand on it's own.

It feels much the same as it did after September 11,2001. Indeed, many of the same words continue to hold true. Whether the violence was caused by evil hearts or by natural circumstances, the feelings that we have are the result of not being in control of our own destiny. We are used to being in control of our lives – who we marry, where we work, how many children we raise, where we live. But when disaster strikes or confronted by crisis, we are shaken by the reality that our control is nothing but an illusion.

“I Am There Among Them” a sermon following Hurricane Katrina, ©2005 the Rev. Todd R. Goddard

Assurance is rooted in our spiritual experience: We are disciples of Jesus Christ. We are people of faith. By our baptism we have chosen to place our trust in God. By our faith we know that God is in control.

Yes, evil worked its way into the hearts of men and terror was brought to New York City; yet we know that God is in control.

Yes, age, illness, and infirmity have left a beloved mother dying; yet we know that God is in control.

Yes, wind and wave swept ashore the Gulf coast, bringing with it suffering, death, and despair; yet we know that God is in control. This is God's world. These are God's children who are suffering. Through us and the rest of the world's faithful, God will work miracles of compassion. God is working miracles of rescue. God is working miracles of restoration. The world will be righted and returned to its course. God is working miracles of returning some control back to His people.

In the mean time, we ask "What can I do?"

I have five observations or suggestions, all rooted in faith, and in our experience of the Almighty, to help see us through these difficult times:

1. Let hope take root.

For me, this means turning off the television (at times), breaking the seductive gaze of overwhelming tragedy. If we are not careful, the media exaggeration and hyperbole can consume us. It is enough to know that help has arrived, or is on the way. Give hope a chance to take root.

2. Do one simple thing.

There is nothing that you or I can do to stop the suffering and make the world return to the way that it once was. There is no healing wand that can be waved to make it all better. But each of us can do one thing. Just one thing. Send in one donation to the United Methodist Committee on Relief, the Salvation Army or the Red Cross. Make a donation at the cash register at Wegmans. Do one thing. Take control by doing one simple thing.

3. Know that faith comes from crisis.

God always uses suffering to call us to return to our faith. It's easy to turn away from God when times are good. It's easy to sleep in on Sundays and not go to church, to send the kids to organized sports on Sunday mornings, to allow church to become just

another institution in the community that does good. We are not about doing good. We are people of faith, that, as a result of our faith, we do good works on the behalf of God.

My beloved, our nation has suffered a great loss, and the suffering has not yet ended. It's time to get back into church. It's time to have some discipline and strengthen our foundations of faith. It's time return our children to Sunday school, to get ourselves back into adult classes, to return to worship, and straighten out our lives with God. There is a spiritual awakening going on in this land. People are searching. We better open our church doors and our hearts, lift up Jesus as the light of the world. We must make sure that everyone who is searching finds Jesus and, as a result, they decide to follow him.

4. Our God is a compassionate God.

While evil always results in suffering, not all suffering is the result of evil. It is vital to make this distinction. Sometimes suffering takes place because of biology, or physics, or chemistry. People suffer as a result of disease because of bad biology or mutated genes. People suffer because gravity causes trees to fall, hurricanes to spin and sometimes people are crushed or drowned. People suffer because chemical imbalances create coma and death. Suffering is sometimes the result of living in our natural world.

Regardless of the cause, the God I've come to know and experience in my life is a compassionate God. God experiences our pain, suffering, and brokenness. God is determined to ease our suffering through the gifts of miracles, by working through the hearts of compassionate disciples and servants he sends on his behalf, by guiding and directing people towards making good choices in their time of rebuilding.

5. Become compassionate yourself.

Just as God is compassionate, we are called to be compassionate. We follow the example of Christ's compassion: who loved us so much that he died to take away our sins; who loved us so much that he rose from the grave to give us eternal life; who loves us so much that each of us have been claimed as His children and made worthy of his inheritance.

Draw from the well of God's compassion and extend compassion to someone else. Just as we are asked to do one thing, become compassionate with one person in need. Whether it is taking a casserole to a grieving family or dropping off clothing at the clothing closet, push yourself to be a compassionate Christian.

Our Gospel lesson, which gives itself to my sermon title for today, ends with these

words of Jesus, “**For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.**” (Matthew 18:20 NRSV).

In New Orleans, “I am there among them.” In Gulfport, Biloxi, and Slidel, “I am there among them.” With the helicopter pilots, the bus drivers, the aide workers, the national guardsmen, the police and firemen, “I am there among them.” In the superdome, in the convention center, in the mud, and in the mess, “I am there among them.”

In New York, in London, in Bagdad, and in Kabul, “I am there among them.” In Rochester, in West Walworth, and right here at Zion, Jesus assures us “I am here among you.”

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.