

Where Two or Three Are Gathered

When I was younger my parents would gather with other parents in the neighborhood to play cards or to enjoy each other's company. No one had any money, so they brought what they could to either our house or another home to make a party for themselves. There they could share parenting ideas, complain about the kids, wonder about the church, or talk about their jobs as many of the mothers had ventured out of the house in the early to mid 1970s.

Have you ever been inside a McDonald's or Dunkin' on a Tuesday morning around 9:00 a.m.? Invariably, you will find a small gathering of up to 6 seniors who have banded together for comradery or support. I have seen other gatherings at The Good Table in Westfield or at the Notch in Southwick. People yearn for companionship—either in a small group or a larger group. Most of us do not want to be alone or on our own constantly. In Westfield, our Thrift Shoppe crew and Christian Fellowship meet regularly for conversation and the opportunity to see friends that they may not necessarily see.

The people of the Old Testament came together whenever they could. Early on, around the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, families were nomads and wandered to where they could survive. Single travelers relied on the hospitality of those who had already set up camp. Groups of travelers would have things to trade or barter in order to get food and maybe even water from those who were more settled. The settled kept an eye on the guests for good hospitality and another on their belongings in case the “guests” were not pure in their intentions.

Folks didn’t necessarily gather for religious purposes until around the time of Jacob. To the best of our knowledge, there were no organized religions or places of worship. After Jacob’s other sons were forgiven by Joseph, they were invited to settle in Egypt to escape the famine. Our scriptures tell us that they enjoyed a time of wealth and prosperity as they assimilated into the Egyptian culture but continued their own practices. I cannot imagine that they would not come together to worship God as they practice Monotheism (the worship of one God) in a polytheistic (many gods) country. Even when the social tides turned

against them, the Hebrew people were able to come together, now as a time of prayer to be delivered from slavery.

Our reading from Exodus describes the first Passover and how they were to eat with their families or neighbors. Again, people came together. Truly, God was with them as the “angel of death” passed over their homes to inflict the plague on the firstborn of the Egyptians. Their instructions to commemorate this and to pass it on to generations to come would ensure the Passover rituals that exist even today.

What also exists today is the embodiment of Jesus’ words “Wherever two or three are gathered in your name, I am there among you.” It was easy for the people of Jesus’ time to gather together, even for religious purposes. Remember, Matthew’s Gospel was first written for those people who wanted to follow “the Way” or the teachings of Jesus but were already practicing the Jewish faith. Things had to be explained to them in terms and words that they would understand. So, when Jesus tells them to “treat those who don’t listen as you would the Gentiles or the Tax Collectors” they would know what to do. Now, by and large, they kept the Gentiles (anyone who wasn’t a Jew) at a

distance since most Gentiles they knew were Roman soldiers or Roman officials. Quite frankly, they were afraid of them. And the tax collectors made a habit of overcharging and keeping the extra for themselves. Jesus usually didn't tell people to ignore others but to be wary of what they may do.

What WE are called to do is to gather and invoke Jesus' name on the gathering. Whenever we are here, of course, we call on God—Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit—to be with us as we worship. We also start our meetings that way so that all we do, all that we say, and all that we are will be for God's greater glory. We, too, are called to gather each week to sing hymns, make music, proclaim the Scriptures, and offer prayers of supplication, thanksgiving, and praise. Like the people of Jesus' time and the early Christians after him, we are able to come together to make sure that our spiritual and physical needs are met. We have deacons and others who check in with people or even physically visit. We bring meals to those who are ill or recovering from surgery or injury. We visit those in the hospital and other care facilities. We do this when we gather for a meal as we did yesterday in Southwick.

It is September and we celebrate another change to begin in our church year. While many of us never went away, we begin to welcome back those who may have left the area for the summer in a time of rest and renewal. Rest, recreation, and renewal—the new three R’s—are important for us to continue our ministries in Westfield and Southwick. Whenever we do these things, let us remember to simply mention that we are gathered in the name of Jesus so that we will recognize him among us.

We must remember that it doesn’t matter who the two or three are who gather. It is not important for us to have “the right” people gathered; who are “the right” people, anyway. We do know that no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey you are always welcome at First Congregational Church of Westfield AND Southwick Congregational Church. Let us remember, especially because of Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel, that whenever we meet, the Risen Christ is always among us.