

*Paths to Community, Part 1:
Time Together; Time Alone; Prayer Together; Prayer Alone*

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Matthew 18:15-20; Mark 3:13-16
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After starting this sermon series at the *center* of Christian community, moving then to the *goal* of Christian community, followed by the *ground* from which Christian community grows, and last week considering some of the *threats* to Christian community, these next two weeks – in week 5 and 6 – we are looking at two paths to Christian community. We'll finish this up next week on Palm Sunday with the practices of Confession and Forgiveness, which are so necessary to the life of a church. This week, we are looking at the rhythm of togetherness and solitude, as a path to Christian community. Time together, time alone. Prayer together, and prayer alone.

The life of the church involves, requires, and offers us the demanding and grounding practices of time together and time alone. Let me repeat that. The life of the church involves, requires, and offers us the demanding and grounding practices of time together and time alone.

They go together. And as we focus our attention on our time together and our time alone, we will be guided by three things. First by Jesus himself - who spent precious time with his disciples, as well as solitude time by himself. If Jesus needed both of these, then so do we. Second, we will be guided by Scripture – in particular, the two texts that Connie read for us – which provide very practical instruction about how to live together and apart. And third, we will be guided by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who has been so helpful throughout this series. In his book, *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer writes, “Whoever cannot be alone should beware of community.” To the degree that we have trouble being alone, when we get all itchy if we are by ourselves without the TV or the internet or a book to occupy our attention, whenever we cannot stand to sit still and be quiet, we will likely have a difficult time being truly present with other people. One page later, Bonhoeffer writes, “And whoever cannot stand being in community should beware of being alone.” By the same token, whoever cannot stand to be with other people, whoever easily gets impatient with others, whenever we get frustrated by the stupidity and annoying habits of other people, that person will likely have difficulty being genuinely alone with themselves.

Now I hope you can tell by the way I have described that, that most of us – at least me – have a bit of growing to do in these regards. Our world, in which we are marinating from the time we are born, discourages us from practicing solitude and silence. Our world makes it so easy for us to be surrounded by noise and words from the time we wake up and check our phones, until the time we go to sleep. Similarly, our world encourages us to view other people, especially those who are different from us, those whose life experiences have

been very different from ours, not as precious gifts who will enlarge and enrich our lives, but to see them as opponents to be defeated, threats to be feared, and competitors who are trying to take what is ours. So we're not getting a whole lot of help from our society in practicing either quiet time by ourselves or attentive time with others.

The life of the church involves life with other disciples. Any romantic illusions that we might have about how blissful life with other disciples in the church must be are usually put to rest after a few months of participation in the life of a local congregation. You only need to be in a small group or a committee for a little while before you realize that relationships in a church are not always easy. Some people may annoy us, and we will annoy some other people. Some people will sin against us, and we will sin against others. We will disagree vigorously with some of the decisions that others make; and others will disagree with some of the decisions that we make. Sometimes we will speak or act too forcefully; other times, we will not act decisively enough; and still other times, we will be like the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3, a congregation that was neither hot nor cold, but was just repulsively lukewarm. Being part of the church can at times be such a bewildering and maddening experience at times, that we may marvel that God has chosen local congregations to be one of the primary vehicles for God's transforming grace and way in the world.

When we participate in the life of a local congregation, where we will encounter different views, different experiences, and different ways of thinking, we can learn an appreciation and patience for people who are other than we are. The events of this past week in Atlanta have revealed how urgent a matter this is. Appreciating those who are different from us – other than us – rather than seeking to do away with them, understanding that they too have been created in the image of God, that they too are people for whom Christ died. Church conflicts and disagreements, which can be so painful to live through, can actually be one place where we learn this.

And lest we think that church conflict or difficulty is a contemporary phenomenon because of how polarized our society is, the entire 18th chapter of Matthew is devoted to the realities of conflict, sin, and violation in the church. And you do not need an entire chapter on conflict resolution unless there is a lot of conflict in the church. Conflict and difficulties have always been part of life in the church, and we may imagine that they always will be. It is almost enough to make you think that, in the strange providence of God, church conflicts are a feature of the church, not a bug. The difficulties, sins, and conflicts in the church are, in some odd Holy Spirit kind of way, one of the means by which God reveals God's upside-down kingdom of grace and mercy for sinners. One of the ways that God reveals the foolishness, weakness, and poverty of the kingdom that turns out to be wiser, stronger, and richer than the success-oriented ways of the world.

For years, I had treasured the statement from our Matthew text that “where 2 or 3 are gathered in Christ's name, Christ is there in their midst.” It had long been a warm, uplifting message about the beauty and power of Christian community. So you can imagine my surprise a couple of years ago when I realized that this statement about Christ's presence was placed in a passage about community conflict. This statement was located not

in some serene, lofty passage about the joys of community, but in a text offering a down-to-earth approach to addressing conflict. (First you do it one-to-one, then with 2 or 3 trusted individuals, then involving the larger community.) Christ is present with us, even – and perhaps especially - when we are in disagreement with each other.

Being together in the church can be really challenging. But then again, so can be alone. (I suppose if it this were easy, anyone would be doing it!) When we are alone, we may find ourselves feeling lonely, we find ourselves alone with our own anxieties and worries, especially if we don't have a WiFi connection or a Netflix subscription or a good book nearby, and unable to distract ourselves from our worries with the noise of other people.

That is why our text from Mark 3 is such a gift. Jesus calls his disciples to him, and he does so – according to the text – for three reasons. Three reasons, though it can be tempting to only notice the two that are the active ones. When we hear this text, our attention can be drawn to the prominent purposes of being called to proclaim the message and being called to cast out demons. These are the public ministries of the church. Each one of us is called – in different ways – to engage in these two ministries. We may not use 'demon' language for our active service, but we may understand that to mean engaging with forces in the world that are harming people, feeding the hungry, ministering to the sick. Each of us is called to some form of these public ministries.

But before he gets to those two, Jesus first calls his disciples in verse 14 *to be with him*. The disciples and apostles are called to be with him, to spend time with him. The time we spend alone with Jesus is what will power our mission. The time we spend alone with Jesus is where our anxieties and worries are addressed and healed over time, so that we are not driven quite so much by them.

Our time alone powers our participation in community, so that we are grounded when we are in the presence of others. And our time in community broadens our time alone, so that we avoid the trap of becoming narrowly self-absorbed. What have you found to be the gifts of being together with others in the church? What have been the blessings of being alone with God? And what do you find are your difficulties with each of these? Our Lord is building the beloved community, with, through, and around us. We get to be a part of that, in our time together and our time alone. To God be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.