

**Proper 18**  
**Matthew 18:15-20**  
**The Rev. Chip Graves**

As I wrote this sermon this past week I was compelled to focus on the oncoming hurricanes, Gustav, Hannah and Ike. I reflected upon the horrible outcome following Katrina. *Could it happen again? Could it possibly happen again just 3 years later?* Keeping in mind the previous devastation of Katrina, it was difficult to contemplate. Katrina caused literally billions of dollars of damage, displacing not tens of thousands but hundreds of thousands of Gulf Coast residents. Families were separated, 1,600 lives were lost, homes were buried, and memories were washed away.

However, the positive aftermath of Gustav seems to have revealed that our prayers had been answered; that the devastation of previous hurricanes had been avoided. I believe it was an empowered community that led to this success. Though the brunt of Gustav hit outside the main New Orleans' corridor, I believe many lives were spared due in large part to the evacuation of 1.9 million people before the storm hit. It was an extraordinary communal effort. This brings us back to our gospel lesson, "wherever two or three are gathered, Christ is there among us."

It's all about community. This is where we find Christ. When a ferry boat comes to rescue those escaping the storm's path, there are no gatekeepers, no questions of political affiliation, red state or blue state. Simply put, when two or three gather in an emergency shelter to avoid the storm, Christ is there. And when two or three gather in a food pantry to ensure nourishment for the homeless, Christ is there also. It's all about working together, supporting one another in Christ. *This makes God smile.*

As we look back at early Christianity, it was vital for the church to develop rules. Piety and self-absorption displayed by Pharisees had gone by the way side; servant-hood and neighbor-before-thy-self became the new focus. And in this New Way, our gospel discusses *dealing with conflict* within the church. *How do we join together, promoting servant-hood, serving the community above and beyond ourselves?*

At first glance, I recall the teachings of Apostle Paul, ever demanding and beseeching us to love Christ by uplifting our neighbor. We see this perfectly displayed in Matthew's parable of the shepherd tending to the one lost sheep while leaving the herd of 99. Jesus also calls us to shepherd the lost sheep, not judge them.

Today's lesson in Matthew is compelling because of Jesus' authority. As indicated in Mt 28:18 Jesus reveals, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

The fact that Jesus will be with us even to the end of the age becomes our prayer. We are called to live out the life of Christ; in him and on behalf of him. And we are called to disciple beyond words; but to action. When our neighbors are confronted by a Gustav, Hannah or some other horrific storm that life presents, we are called as Christians to step forward.

I believe the difference between a luke-warm Christianity and a true discipleship in Christ is displayed before us. To merely watch CNN, Fox News or MSNBC as these horrific storms pass by is simply not enough. We must do more. If we can physically assist those in need, so be it. If we can send dollars to help others then that's fantastic. But at the very least, we must get on our knees, pray to God for those in harm's way; and contemplate the possibilities in Christ.

Christ treasures us. And he desires us to be in community as a parent hopes his children will care for one another in their absence. Jesus came to us to transform us from the personal to the communal. We are to live the life of Christ humbly and in servant-hood of one another.

In the end, Jesus is still trying to unshackle us from a disillusioned faith, one where we focus on our accomplishments; one in which we focus on who's right//who's wrong. I believe there is more to Christianity than this exclusive theological dogma. I believe that in Mt. 16:24, Jesus sums it up for us, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."  
Amen.