

Agreement

I kind of wonder if Jesus was cracking some sort of joke when he told the disciples: "If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven." Yeah, sounds good, until you start trying to figure out what two of us can really agree upon. Maybe it's just my cynical mind trying to grab at me, but whenever I see sports teams take a knee and pray before a game, or hear a player thank God for a victory afterwards, I sort of wonder, "do they think God really takes sides like that?" I mean, there are at least two of them praying usually, and probably at least two on the other team who prayed for their team to win too, so how does this pan out? I mean, as hard as it is for us to agree on things, two is not a very high bar, and Jesus did just get through teaching them a lesson about how to get along with each other and reconcile after a disagreement between brothers. It seems like volunteering God to make any sort of thing that two people might pray come true might be a bit dangerous, and on top of that, it also kind of sets the whole relationship up for failure.

There have been plenty of times where I know I have prayed earnestly and in agreement with more than one other Christian and the thing I was praying for didn't happen. Jesus himself prayed that the cup would pass from him, and I'm sure, if he had been able to stay awake, Peter or one of the other disciples would have wholeheartedly supported that prayer. There has to be something else going on here, and I think it relates to the final sentence of this scripture: "wherever two or more are gathered in my name there I am in the midst." Now I will tell you that in small churches, that is sometimes held on to rather hopefully, but it's not just an endorsement of numerically small gatherings, it is a qualifier about the way we pray and the way God answers. Remember Jesus prayer: "not my will, but thy will," and the way that works its way into the disciples prayer: "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Being gathered in the name of Jesus means you are gathered as his disciples, as the Body of Christ, as the sacred Church, it doesn't just mean you happen to be hanging out at the bar together or something like that. If you are "in the name of Jesus" you are being somehow conformed to his image and you should be praying the types of prayers that he taught us to pray, which in every request, also acknowledge God's sovereignty and steadfast love.

How do we come into a place where we can be in agreement on that sort of level, that's a lot harder than most of our prayers care to get. It's a huge hurdle to jump over, and it can make you wonder if Jesus really was actually messing with his disciples. Case in point: I was given the assignment to fill in for Michele teaching about the confessions of our church this morning in one of the adult Sunday School classes. My subject was the Confession of Belhar, which is the latest addition to our Book of Confessions. Officially added so recently that it isn't even in the published edition until next month, but the Belhar Confession is actually quite relevant to our times as well as to our Gospel teaching this morning.

Belhar was written by the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, during the period when Apartheid was still in full force. Mandela was in prison, Soweto was a war zone, and the Church found itself having to repent of the racist segregation of their nation, indeed they had divided themselves into the whites only Dutch Reformed Church and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church for people designated as "coloured." They wrote this statement as a confession of their own error, as a call to their culture to repent.

They do not use the word Apartheid anywhere in the statement, they focus on unity of the Church as the positive focus. Unity is a product of Christ's redeeming and reconciling work in the world. The

confession says: "Unity is therefore both a gift and an obligation for the Church of Jesus Christ;" which would appear to have been rather crucial to Jesus as well. But it's not easy, and it requires us to go about things in way that runs against our own inclinations to always seek our own advantage.

If you are selfish, defensive and angry, the way so many religious types seem to be (not a recent phenomenon) you are certainly not gathered in Jesus' name. If you harbor fear and resentment for people who are different from you, you are not gathered in Jesus' name. If you are always seeking a way to control things and work things to your benefit you are not gathered in Jesus' name. It was an eye opening experience to me when this Confession of Belhar came around to the Presbytery for a vote. I had read it and participated in a study about it, and the more I read it, the more I was convicted that it should be adopted as part of our confessional history. I understood that changing the Book of Confessions is a pretty big deal in Presbyterian world, it is not an easy sell, especially taking something that is from a foreign country, originally written in Afrikaans, which speaks to a cultural context that actually doesn't exist in the same way here as it did there. But because the framers of Belhar purposefully and consistently strove to found their statement on the truth of the Gospel rather than just the truth of white or black, they came up with something that transcends even the significant historical context of Apartheid and speaks to racism and division which is unfortunately all too much a part of our context.

The thing that sort of shocked me was the reaction against Belhar, once I saw what it said and what it offered, I was rather taken aback by the people who I knew and respected who simply wanted to write it off for one reason or another. Some of the resistance was just based on good old foot dragging, but other resistance was really almost paranoid. The paranoid end of it suspected that Belhar's confession of unity would "leak" into other areas of the church where we struggle to be inclusive and equal. Fear of being "forced" to accept one kind of unity was driving us away from accepting unity as a general principle. The fear that the same arguments we took up to affirm one marginalized group might require us to affirm another marginalized group was a millstone around our neck. That fear was keeping us from being gathered in the name of Jesus, it was keeping us from praying with one voice and it still does.

The thing is if you're not willing to go that route then you will not be a part of the church. The church requires communion and communion takes work, and this is the system by which we do that work, we seek agreement, so that as Belhar states: "unity must be visible." It's not good enough just to say it, it's not enough to acknowledge that we're all one in Christ and then run around acting like bigots and racists. It's not okay to say that someone is your brother or sister in Christ and then practice Apartheid; that friends and neighbors is sin. That is what Belhar confessed despite the laws of their land. That was a prophetic voice, that is the kind of voice the church needs to raise a little more often. Jesus says, "if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in Heaven."