



The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 18th February, 2024

"Living in Harmony"

A reflection for the First Sunday of Lent, and the Commissioning of our Church Council (Leadership Team). "Living in Harmony" is the theme for this year's Lenten Study Series.

Matthew 18:15-20

"If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. But 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. If that person 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.

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Contemporary Reading of Grace (Gerard Moore) from "Living in harmony"

Harmony is a discipline.
It has to be won, held, remade, revalued.
At its best it is built around the joyful play of difference,
a mutual love and respect, and a treasuring of other voices and ways.
It builds for a trust and consensus.

"Harmony". What is it, exactly? Well, I'm not sure it's exactly any one thing. I think it's a lot of things!

We know the musical association: people sing or playing the same music in different ways, in such a way as to make the whole thing richer. The different parts kind of flow around each other, underneath and around the melody line, with a really important challenge: to work together! To bring their different parts together something beautiful. Sometimes the parts are written to be followed. Other times they're intuitive, and you just feel your way into the harmonies.

The same is true in art and colour, and in all kinds of ways that human beings express ourselves and live together.

It's true in ways we experience, express, and respond to holiness in the midst of life too – or it can be!

And unsurprisingly perhaps, that's my context for this witness today – a day when our Gathering brings together the beginning of Lent and the Commissioning of our Church Council.

Our Gospel teaching and Contemporary Reading of Grace, are both important as we think about those two things.

(I'm not sure if I need to say that me speaking about harmony is for the benefit of all of us, not just the Church Council, but if I do need to, I just did!)

"Living in Harmony" is the theme for this year's Lenten Study, which we do together with the people of St Thomas the Apostle Roman Catholic Church.

I have to confess that I wondered if it might be a bit humdrum, until I read the introduction to the studies. That included the words of our Reading of Grace from Gerard Moore, which I love. The first sentence of the intro, however, was what really got me sitting up and taking notice:

"We live in a period that is rancorous and divisive, so this is our Lenten meditation"

OK, so not just encouragement to play nicely together, then...

Professor Moore asserts that in such times, "harmony" is much more than a nice idea, it is a spiritual discipline, a practice essential to our life and well-being. Hear again how he says it:

*Harmony is a discipline. It has to be won, held, remade, revalued.
At its best it is built around the joyful play of difference,
a mutual love and respect, and a treasuring of other voices and ways. It builds for a trust and consensus.*

You'll hear and see this passage again as Lent unfolds, and we'll be taking time with the "*Living in Harmony*" theme over the next few weeks, leading us towards Easter.

I wonder what you'll see and hear in it. For me that phrase "... *the joyful play of difference*" just grabs my mind and heart!

All of this finds its place in that passage from Matthew's Gospel, and the famous quote: "*where two or more are gathered...*".

This passage gave the people of Matthew's community, and all who follow the way of Jesus, a process to to live out that way, in how disagreements and interpersonal issues were to be dealt with.

Even more than that, I believe, it described what the way of living together was to be; what would characterise such community life, and how the "Jesus values" would shine through, even when they were dealing with the stuff of disagreement.

Jesus was quite clearly aware that having groups of passionate people trying to live and work together was... well... complex!

And equally clearly, we see from the book of Acts, the early church letters, and pretty much the whole of Christian history, that he was right!

And so his instruction for sisters and brothers in faith, was to remember that when they came together it was as if he was present in their midst - and act like it!

Harmony can be hard work. It can be nice and warm fuzzy too, but it can be tough. Gerard Moore's expression is helpful, I believe: it's a discipline, a spiritual practice. It doesn't just happen. I think that Jesus' message through Matthew's Gospel says pretty much the same thing. We have to work at it!

In all of that, though, this passage of Matthew's also reminds us that there is, and can be, a place of common mind and heart - Prayer.

Where the invitation is to put aside egos and agendas for a bit, and allow ourselves to attend together to being in the presence of GOD, however we understand and experience that – and perhaps especially when we understand and experience that presence differently.

Prayer has a richness when we pray alone, and even deeper richness when we come together... perhaps it can even be our "*joyful play of difference*"!

Friends, I believe Gerard Moore is right: "*We do live in a period that is rancorous and divisive...*" But don't let that stop us!!

Let's be different! And let's shine with GOD's reflection!

Grow 4 your life!
Listen. Remember. Share. Act.