

September 4 A 2011 "Gather Together"

A word of advice:

If you want company, paint the front of your house.

Last month, I painted the back of my house.

Nary a visitor.

This weekend, I began on the front.

I talked with people in cars, walking by, stopping in.

It was a social event.

Some guys came with their lawn chairs and coolers and made an afternoon of it. You know that the Twins are playing poorly when house painting is more entertaining.

The bad news is, they were taking bets to see when I would fall off.

The good news is, I was getting 4-to-1 odds.

Earlier this week, I was out on a dog walk.

I saw a dozen "things" sticking out of the water in the pond in front of the Blue Cross building.

What is that?

How somebody thrown stuff into the pond?

After a minute, the ducks poked their heads out of the water.

Oh, that's what "that" was.

Duck butts, all grouped together.

Ducks understand about being together.

On Wednesday, I went fishing.

I watched the ducks gather at the shore.

I watched the birds gather on the small islands.

I watched the people gather in the boats.

Fishing for me is a social event, mostly because I don't tend to catch very many fish.

For me, fishing is all about conversation and the sharing of life.

On Wednesday, I shared a pontoon boat with a psychologist, a doctor, a banker, a nuclear engineer, and a hardware store person.

We had very interesting conversation.

I have had four funeral services in the last month.  
I have seen how meaningful it is when people we know stand with us in our loss, sit with us through long dark nights, cry with us.  
When sorrow comes, when we know grief or pain, how significant it is that we do not move through those times alone.  
In this same time period, I also have three wedding services.  
On occasions of joy, we seldom celebrate alone.  
We gather together for weddings and birthdays and the various happy milestones we pass along the way.  
It is a complement to our humanity, I think, that in our joys we invite others to come and share them.  
And in our sorrows, others come and help us bear them.

Some people don't get it.  
They see other people as threats, challenges, problems.  
The humorist Will Rodgers was once asked, "What's wrong with the world?"  
He replied, "People!"  
Of course he was being humorous.  
Others have been more serious and cynical.  
One said, "The world would be a pretty good place to live if it weren't for people in it."  
Some people actually live with that attitude, never mind that *they* are some of those people.

But after all the cynics have had their say, I still believe that we human beings really have some pretty good things going for us.  
In spite of our flaws and obvious weaknesses, we are not hopeless.  
And I'm convinced God sees us in the same way.  
After all, as we read in John 3:16, God loves us so much that the beloved Son was given on our behalf.

When Jesus came, he called some people together.  
He said, "Come, be with me."  
And they came—from their fishing boats and their fields and their homes, and they were together with him.  
After his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus summoned others.  
In fact, he invited everyone.

Those who came he called disciples.

The whole group of these he called the church, in Greek “ecclesia,” meaning “the ones called out.”

The Church of Jesus Christ is that number of people who have been called out from wherever they were and have gathered to be together with him.

Christians in the early church suffered persecutions, which made their relationships with other Christians even more precious.

It was common in those days to encounter other people as you walked on the roads.

As two people paused to exchange greetings, one wondered who the other was—not so much their name or town, but on whether they were a Christian, a follower of the Way?

You couldn’t just say, “I’m a Christian; are you one also, perhaps?”

To be a Christian was a crime often punishable by death.

Instead, you would take your walking stick and trace the shape of a fish in the dust of the road.

This was a symbol of the early church, and you would know that if you were a member of the Way.

If the stranger made no response to the signal, a superficial conversation would take place briefly, courteous goodbyes would be said, and the two would go their separate ways.

But if that pictured symbol on the ground was recognized by the other, and they traced a similar pattern alongside the first, then you found a brother or sister in Christ. And you would talk:

- About your two Christian communities
- About ways that your brothers and sisters coped with the hostilities
- About the rich meaning of faith in Christ, that it made it all worthwhile
- About the glory of God.

Now, as you went on your way, you had a new sense of strength, a new courage for hard tasks, a vision and a hope that burned more brightly than before.

As Christians, God has placed us together. We gather for worship. We gather for learning. We gather for service. We gather for prayer. We gather for fellowship. I love this quote from Todd Bolsinger: “The Church is not a Home Depot for the spiritual do-it-yourselfer. The Church is a people who serve as the flesh-and-blood witness to a life-transforming God.” We gather.

The apostle Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 12—and elsewhere—that the people are the body of Christ.

Each part is part of the whole body.

The body is an assembly of parts.

Without its parts, the body is not.

A number of severed parts does not make a body.

It is in the assembling, the gathering together, that we are the body.

Consider the grandeur.

One person cannot sing The Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah.

It takes the gathered.

The mighty and mammoth redwood trees grow only clusters.

The art museum does not consist of the work of a single artist.

The most impressive buildings are not the work of a single individual.

The best football teams do not consist solely of great football players, but of people who play together.

So, in the Christian community, we are gathered together as the body.

God meant us to be together, to serve together, to worship together.

Matthew the Gospel writer collected some of Jesus' sayings into five great discourses.

Chapter 18 is a gathering of sayings related to the life of the church.

In this chapter, we have a number of sayings about who we are as the church and what we should be about.

In our Gospel story today, Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Notice the choice of verb: gathered.

That's what Christians do: we gather.

Notice this also: Jesus is present in the gathering.

In fact, the whole point of the gathering is to be connected with Christ.

The whole point of the Christian Faith is to be gathered in Christ.

The Christ Faith is this:

God is at the center.

We worship Christ as our Lord.

We live out our faith as part of the body.

Gathered together is our best help for living the Christian Faith.

Gathered together is our best help for doing the work we are called to do in the world.

Gathered together is what makes the Church the Church.

We are not spiritual do-it-yourselfers, but the people of God living as the body of Christ.

Peace to you, my brothers and sisters in Christ.

Amen.