

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We just heard Jesus' words, "[W]here two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Many know this verse from the prayer attributed to St. Chrysostom, patriarch of Constantinople in the fourth century, that's found in our morning and evening prayer liturgies. St. Chrysostom's prayer invokes God in the words "you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will be in the midst of them." They are comforting words; they are encouraging words; they are hopeful words; they are challenging words: comforting, in knowing that God is with us; encouraging, in knowing that God is never far off; hopeful, in knowing that we can call upon God at any time; and challenging, in knowing that we are accountable to God for our actions.

"Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." It sounds like God can be anywhere, and, of course, God can. On a hike, even if the hike is cut short by the monsoons (if they ever come)? Yes, God is there. At home, around the kitchen table, even if the family has ordered take out? Yes, God is there. At work, around the conference table, even if the project hangs in the balance? Even at work, God is there. The key is to be gathered in Jesus' name. We don't need to wait until we are in church at worship to invite God into our midst. God is already there, or should I say here. Wherever we gather, God is with us. Our task is to gather in Jesus' name and to ask God to make us aware of God's presence. This can happen on a hike, in the kitchen, in the conference room. It doesn't even have to be done overtly. A simple prayer can work wonders. After all, Jesus promises, "if two of you agree on

earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by [God] in heaven.” Try it and see what happens, and let me know the result.

It’s interesting that Jesus’ comforting, encouraging, hopeful, and challenging words are given in the context of how to settle disputes that arise within the church. Isn’t it surprising that Jesus knew that there would be church disputes? Maybe some of you are thinking that you don’t have to be divine to foresee that there would be disputes within the church! And you’re right! We often forget that the Church, like Christ, is both human and divine. The Church is created by God as the body of Christ, with Jesus as its head, and the Holy Spirit as its guide. [It is into this body of Christ, the Church, that Milo will be baptized in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.] But the Church is made up of people like you and me [and soon to be Milo], fallible human beings falling far short of perfection. Remember it has been said that the Church is not a club for saints, but a hospital for sinners! So we must remember that the Church is made up of people like you and me [and soon to be Milo, and it’s not perfect. That’s why we gather in Jesus’ name and ask God to make us aware of God’s presence among us.

We often forget, too, that churches are living organisms, just like people. They go through cycles of birth, growth, strength, slowing down, and even death. But they can also experience resurrection and rebirth, with God’s grace, as Holy Faith certainly has over the years. As individual Christians we know how we are supposed to act. As the corporate body of Christ, we sometimes forget how to act as individual Christians. Today’s Scripture readings provide us with good reminders of how to act as Christians, both individually and corporately.

St Paul, in his letter to the Romans, addresses us as individuals. He tells us: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” What wonderful advice! “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” Imagine what the world would be like if we

all practiced these words! And what's stopping us? Remember, "if two of [us] agree on earth about anything [we] ask, it will be done for [us] by [God] in heaven." Paul further observes that, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." Paul defines love as doing no wrong to our neighbor; it's as simple and as complex as that. The bottom line is that if we love our neighbor as ourselves, then we won't get into trouble; our individual actions will ensure that we act as Christians when we join together and act corporately.

It's for that reason that Jesus addresses us corporately in the Gospel as the body of Christ, the Church. Jesus tells us how to deal with a member of the church who sins against us. First, there is the personal approach: go and speak to the member by yourself and outline your difference without rancor but in Christian love. If the personal approach fails, try the group approach: take two or three members with you for support of the truth of what you're saying in Christian love. Jesus didn't pull the number two or three out of a hat, but it comes from the Law of Moses in Deuteronomy, which required two or three witnesses to convict a person of any wrongdoing in ancient Israel. (Deuteronomy 19.15) But, if that fails, use the corporate approach: tell it to the church, and let the opinion of the whole church have its impact. Jesus' words are a prescription for a healthy church.

A healthy church possesses certain hallmarks, such as freedom from rancor, ill will, and assuming the worst of others. And I have to say – The Church of the Holy Faith is a healthy church! That doesn't mean that members of healthy churches don't have differences with one another, but they don't hide their differences either. They speak to each other in Christian love. They don't talk behind other people's backs. They don't try to triangulate people, so that they acquire allies, rather than speak the truth directly. And they don't stir the pot by claiming to have some insider knowledge about what's happening in the church. If you want to know what's happening, ask a

member of the Vestry, the clergy, or the staff. At all times remember whose church it is: it's God's church, the body of Christ with Jesus as its head, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Remember, too, the Church is a constantly creating and constantly changing organism. At no other time in recent history has the Church been in such a state of flux (and sometimes confusion!) as we attempt to bring God's Word and God's love to a world that seems not to listen and little interested. Change is imperative to the life of the Church, and although it's difficult, we as the members of the body of Christ must remain open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We as members of Holy Faith have a special calling for ministry from this place. On my vacation I have reflected about this. Sometimes being away from the familiar gives us a new perspective. In what ways is it important for us to remain open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that we can more effectively carry out our ministry [to the next generation like Milo and those who come after him]? What new and exciting possibilities lie before us, and what must we do to achieve these possibilities? How may we best support one another in our ministry from Holy Faith? I invite you, individually and corporately, to ponder these questions and explore their answers, keeping in mind the comfort, encouragement, hopefulness, and challenge presented by Jesus' words, "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Amen.