

Living Together* **Matthew 18:15-20*

In the 70's there was a very popular music group called Earth, Wind and Fire. Since the last time we were together, I have had some encounters with earth and wind and fire, and certainly all of us who were here or near for Hurricane Irma can claim such an encounter with wind and water. During these weeks these elements and members of the human family have taught me a great deal.

When we flew to Oregon we flew from San Francisco to Eugene. We saw beautiful mountains and lakes from the plane. What breath-taking sights to take in. Anytime I am in a plane high above the earth I get a new sense of perspective. I remember that my worries and struggles take place on a planet full of the grandeur and grace of God... that we live together as a huge human family... When I fly over whole cities full of people I remember they have worries of their own and God loves each of them and our family as well. It is harder to hold onto petty worries when I receive the gift of perspective. But those beautiful sights from the plane were diminished and dimmed by the wildfires in California, some started by those same humans, loved by God, but sometimes careless in their actions. Because we live together in community, we sometimes suffer the consequences when others make bad choices.

It was clear and beautiful when we landed in Eugene. Our son picked us up and drove us to his home where we got to meet their dog, Baker, a 9 month old Corgi full of energy. We had seen pictures of Baker, of course, but finally being there with him we could feel his shiny fur and watch his little legs churn when he chased a ball. Something new is formed when we are in the same physical space with people and even our pets. There is a forming of community, a deep connection. After many months of being apart we finally could be in the same room as a family with our son and his partner, their cat and dog. There is a power and beauty in being together that is impossible to replicate with phone calls or even Facetime or Skype. We stayed at their house, we lived together for our time there. We could hug, and see each other's eyes and body language and mood. We were together in the sleepy mornings and competitive Scrabble games and picking tomatoes from their garden for dinner. There was a holy presence in our midst. The same is always more than the parts when we live in community because the presence of love, of the Christ bathed our living together with grace and wonder..

The then spent a couple of days in the Columbia River Gorge. We saw Multnomah Falls and hiked a beautiful, but steep trail next to a winding creekway. The path was very narrow in parts so thick wire cables were anchored to the rock face to help us keep our balance. With encouragement from her family, Jude was able to overcome a long held fear of such activities. She walked on those steep and narrow paths not once, but twice, both going and coming. Those who have facebook can see some pictures. I was very proud of Jude

for overcoming her fear, possible I think, because of the encouragement of those who love her. Living together in the spirit of love together can give us strength to accomplish the impossible.

But not all gatherings of humans have positive outcomes. One day after we left the River Gorge, some young men, trying to impress young ladies, defied posted signs and set off fireworks on the very trail we had hiked. They started a forest fire that still burns today. That day two days after we were there, 130 hikers were trapped by the fire and had to spend the night down by the creek, with no shelter, just some supplies air dropped in until the next day when they were led on a 13 mile hike to get out. Thankfully only one person had to be hospitalized for exhaustion after the rescue, but there were no other injuries. The entire town where we stayed had to be evacuated, I saw pictures of flames towering over the Airbnb house we had occupied. Living together means our actions sometimes have consequences for others. Those young people will face some serious consequences for their actions. A most beautiful place filled with ferns and animals and a babbling brook is now burned out. Some big tree's seeds will sprout in the rich burnt soil, but it will be a while until the beauty we experienced returns.

When we returned to our son's home, we went through the Willamette River Valley nestled between two mountain ranges. Unfortunately, because of other wild fires, it was now covered with thick haze - sometimes making it hard to breathe. But even though the air was hard to take, farmers were preparing the earth for planting. It was certainly a labor of love in that horrible haze. Even we in Florida will benefit from their labors. Though they work alone in their tractors, because farmer's work literally feeds the community, the love of God surrounds them and the power of community gave them the strength to continue their work.

We came home this past Thursday knowing that Irma awaited. We had talked to Richard Dilts about the possibility of Jude and i and my parents staying with him if a hurricane came. Richard called us right away to see when we were coming and we took him up on his offer. Richard had also opened his home to some others from church so we were a group of 10. But then Jude and I made calls to check in with church members and make sure they were ok. We found two families that were thinking about staying in mobile homes.. I asked Richard if there was room at the inn. And without hesitation he said, "yes." Where two or three are gathered in my name I am in the midst of them.. Jesus was among us. One of the couples came. Then Helen, Richard's partner Jimmy's mother and her husband came. We also had 6 dogs. What a miracle it was to see every new group come in with food and blankets to share. Everyone pitched in to help everyone else. I was so touched with how everyone - even those who had just met them - helped make sure my Father and Helen, who both have mobility issues, were safe and had everything they needed. We became a community of care for one another. And I know that same experience was replicated at the Wetter household

and so many other homes and shelters where families and neighbors and total strangers supported and helped one another in this time of real danger.

On Tuesday, after the crisis had passed, I was working on the sign board out front, inviting people to come to our regularly scheduled prayer service that day at 11 am. I thought perhaps given a couple hours notice one or two people from the community might take some time to pray after surviving Irma, but only church members came. And while I was putting up the letters I heard a car honking and someone yelling in Thorton's parking lot telling the one ahead of them to hurry up. Later that day I saw a terrible accident on 64 involving 3 badly damaged cars. It seemed to me that by Tuesday morning, many of us were back to our busy, rushed, less than considerate, careless selves. Going about focused on our little problems and needing to hurry to solve them, until the next little problem presented itself. I know I had a struggle with that.

So the question is, do we need to return to that lifestyle? Or perhaps a better question is How can we keep living out as our best selves? Perhaps if we remember that when we live together, Christ is in our midst. perhaps that would help. And to maintain that thought regular spiritual disciplines like prayer and coming to worship can help us stay in the space of love, grounded in God's grace and love.

Our task as God's people is to live a different life, a holy life, not in the sense of being perfect, but making sure we do not give in to the world with its busy-ness and conflict and drama and rush, rush, rush. We must model a different kind of living. We must remind the world that we live together always. That we can be kind and considerate to each other, friend or family, stranger or foreigner, at all times, and not just when the hazy cloud of our mortality comes over the horizon. Let us strive to keep living in love and in community. We don't have to "return to normal" if normal means being anxious and combative. Let us resolve as a community of faith to live together more consciously. Let us cultivate together the presence of love, of light, of grace, of Jesus in our midst. AMEN

Matthew 18:15-20

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, 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 the member 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."