

WHERE IS JESUS?
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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September 6, 2020

Today's Gospel lesson reminds me of a story from my own life. When I was a sixth grader, a very innovative Sunday School teacher invited several of us in the class to work one-on-one with a second grader for six weeks, during the regular Sunday School hour. She was a remarkable teacher; my memory is that she gave us no instructions other than to spend the hours as we saw fit. I remember how trusted I felt, and how important it was to me to prove worthy of that trust. Our teacher knew exactly how to motivate us – by requiring us to take responsibility.

I remember little David, the boy I was asked to work with, very well. He was known as something of a “behavior problem.” Today, we would have recognized an attention issue. So, on our first gleaming Sunday morning together, I marched us outside for a walk to the lake in the park across the street from the church. Outside the confines of the building, walking briskly around the lake, I remember asking David where he thought Jesus was. “Here with us,” he said.

May we never make the mistake of thinking that good theology is done only by adults, let alone only by trained theologians. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Matthew 18:20) Little David sensed this truth as we shared our young faith lives together. It is a core belief of the Jewish and Christian traditions: when people come together in faith, or seeking faith, God comes.

In the world that produced the New Testament, this was expressed in the Jewish text called the *Mishnah*. Listen to these words: “But if two sit together and the words of the Law [are spoken] between them, the Divine Presence rests between them.” (from *Abot*, in Craig A. Evans, *Matthew*, p. 335) You hear how very close these words are to our Gospel text. Jesus took this entirely Jewish idea and shifted it from gathering together around *Torah* – the words of the Law – to gathering together in his name. As the New Testament so often does, an exclusively Jewish practice – studying Torah – is replaced by a practice that can include Gentiles – gathering in the name of Jesus. Judaism is not replaced but enlarged to include the wider community. As always, the original core principle is maintained: in this case, that God comes when people relate to one another in faith.

And there is more. Another teaching of the *Mishnah* is that God “does not despise the prayer of the congregation.” (from *Berakot* 8a); that is, “the united prayer of many was much more effective than the prayer of one.” (Evans, p. 335) So exactly as Jesus teaches his disciples: “if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” (Matt. 18:19) So not only is God known in relationship, but prayer emerging *from* relationship – prayer *in community* - is powerful.

The point is not that God cannot be known in our private devotions, nor that our personal prayers are not heard and answered. Jesus retired regularly for private prayer and refreshment. The great good news is simply this: that when we come together, as my young friend and I discovered in our walks around the lake decades ago, God joins us and empowers our common life. We are meant to know, love, and serve God with others.

This is such an important reminder during these days of enforced physical distancing. (I prefer the term physical distancing to social distancing because it is more important than ever that we *not* socially distance.) Although we must keep a physical distance, although we are masked, although any gathering we do must be done carefully, we are still entirely free to bring love and care and

presence to our interactions. Many have noted that the experience of wearing masks creates an awkwardness. Of course, it's true at first – it is unfamiliar. Try not to let it stop you from being fully present. It can be done! We may be as socially close as we like! This is true on video, on the phone, and in person. And Jesus is as present as ever, empowering our prayers and our actions, whenever and however we gather. He is present and known to us in this online service. God is hearing and answering our prayers. The constraints of our COVID protocols do not constrain the Divine Presence in our midst.

Of course, we long for more physical closeness. We are beginning, very carefully, to have more of it. Our Garden Parties have brought a lot of joy. Starting next Sunday, a short, optional outdoor Communion service will be offered at noon. And of course, the day will come when we all gather again as we did before, and great will be our rejoicing.

Here yet once again, though, let us pause and learn from these strange days. While we are still in them, let us be as present to one another as ever; let us remember that God is as present with us as ever. There will be other challenges after all of this is over, perhaps even greater than those we are facing now. Jesus will come, though, whenever we gather, whatever comes. God's love will continue, unfailing, and unchanging. We're learning that now. May we not forget it.