

Intimacy

“Where two or three come together”

Reflection 32 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

It’s true that many people who grew up going to church don’t any more, that many people who still believe in God have all but given up on church sometimes for no good reason at all – it just happened – but sometimes because they have found church to be too sectarian and judgmental, and less humane and understanding, less caring and compassionate, than they are. They seek compassion, decency, common sense and inclusiveness but in their own experiences they have not found these things in churches, mosques and synagogues. They seek to make sense of a God they still believe in but whom they struggle to find in organized religion. And they will not go to churches they find to be less moral than they themselves are. And yet they still seek connection. They still seek to build community. They still seek intimacy.

Many seek to find it on Facebook or through other social media, but they don’t. Because social media far too often desensitizes us. It coarsens us. Things are said on Facebook, for instance, that we would not dare say in face-to-face conversation so it creates more and more people who gloss over everything with an absolute lack of self-awareness, who no longer realize that actions have consequences, words have consequences. Too often social media creates distance as we choose our “friends” only from those who think like us and we learn to live in a world framed for us only by fringe media. So too often social media creates isolation. It gives the impression of intimacy though not the real thing. But if I have a thousand “friends” on Facebook, why do I need more in real life?

The truth is we all need a place where we can find spiritual friends, that is, friends who know us on soul level with whom we can share our lives and our struggles, our joys and our sorrows, our fears and our dreams, friends who know us as we are with whom we can be completely open and honest, friends who offer us good counsel and caring attentiveness, friends we see often and can count on. We all need a place where it’s safe to talk about life’s least safe issues, issues like racism and abortion and sexuality, where all kinds of ideas can be freely examined and where diversity of viewpoint will be protected and honored, where people can be completely honest and truth can eventually be found. We all need a place where everyone counts, everyone matters, where no one is left behind, where they can participate and not just be spectators, where their special gifts can surface and be tried and used and honored and celebrated, where their voices can be heard, where we can learn empathy for people who are not like us, who think differently from us, who vote differently from us, who are different from us in race, ethnicity, gender, class and sexual orientation.

Church done right is meant to be that place where there is grace, where the teaching is kind and loving, and where circles of care and compassion are getting ever larger and not smaller, and of course where people sense the presence of God, their oneness with God, that God is as near as the air they breathe, that as they empty themselves God fills them. And so I find great reassurance in Matthew 18:18- 20 and its fundamental truth that Jesus promises to be with us, promises to be present with us, promises that where two or three come together in his name he will be with them.

It's a passage with interesting teaching right before it and right after it. Verses 15-17 tell of what to do when "your brother sins against you," a text turned into a manual of church discipline over the centuries but really a text about preserving community. And then with verse 21 Jesus begins to radically emphasize forgiveness: that we forgive from our hearts over and over and over, seven times seventy if we need to. But those are themes for another time.

What I focus on is Matthew 18:18-20 which has a point or two difficult to grasp at first. Jesus tells us, for instance, that if two of us on earth agree about anything we ask for, it will be done for us by our Father in heaven. And surely we all know how many times this hasn't worked. But we also know how childishly we usually ask, how selfishly, how fearfully, and how petulantly. We know what we want, and we want it right now, never mind that if we got it, it might destroy us.

Actually something else is going on in this text. In Greek, it's a future perfect tense. Whatever we bind on earth will have been (already) bound in heaven; and whatever we loose on earth will have been (already) loosed in heaven. And in that spirit, whatever we agree on will turn out to be what God is doing or has already done, when it's not just me thinking, but it's two or three serious believers thinking together, testing an idea, provoking and challenging one another. The truth will turn out to be what we already know in our hearts to be true – if we do it together.

And it's this sense of Jesus being with us whenever we come together even in our smallest gatherings that is so good. I need a place where I sense that God is as near as the air I breathe, a place where we are brothers and sisters to one another in a great joyous family where God is our Abba/Father, where we are always communicating with one another, always checking in with one another, feeling joy in one another's presence, sharing laughter and tears, looking forward to times together, always feeling protective and supportive of one another; a place where I can hear the faith journeys of others, see God in them, and then have them trace out the workings of the Spirit in my life when I've lost track. The truth is everyone needs this place.

More than that, we all need a place where empathy is learned, where we worship side by side with people who are not like us. They are older. They are younger. They are richer. They are poorer. They are more liberal. They are more conservative. They are white. They are black. They are Asian. They are Hispanic. They are straight. And they are gay. We all need such a place. Otherwise someone walks into a black church and kills nine people "to start a race war."

But where do we learn empathy? Where do we learn the empathy that a diverse society absolutely needs, that the world needs? Where do we learn to truly "get" someone who is very different from us, to grasp with appreciation their vision, their dreams and the things they're afraid of? From where does empathy come? And in what social setting is it learned? It's not necessarily learned in our schools anymore. Too often it's not learned in our churches either. Churches who see themselves as the protectors of orthodoxy, of doctrine, of traditional cultural values, have little room to teach or practice or learn empathy. Many such churches have outlived their usefulness. And more and more people know this. They know this deep in their hearts. And that's good.

In fact, it's exciting to live in the times in which we live. It is very likely that today we stand on the threshold of a great global spiritual awakening, a religious turning point that comes, say, every 500 years, the likes of which has not been seen since the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, a great spiritual shift, a cultural transformation when people will learn to respect one another in their differences and learn to learn from one another, and discover that this too was part of what Jesus was trying to get us to understand. And far from things falling apart, things may well be coming together. Some things, in fact, need to fall apart, and in their falling apart space is made for what is new and better.

So it has always been when the church comes to its great turning points. All such times are at first unsettling, but they also offer great hope. They challenge what isn't working in the church and its message and mission. They point to new insight and direction. And in the end, historically this is what always happens: faith catches fire again and dynamically spreads. This time truly globally: a new world in the morning.

In the meantime, where do we find the intimacy our hearts crave and the connections our minds depend on? And where do we learn empathy? Where do our children and our children's children learn empathy? From whom? And with whom? And where?

– Dale Pauls