

14 Pentecost A
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

It surprises nearly everyone to know that I played football in High School. My best friend signed up, and I just kind of went along with it. I didn't play on the varsity team, and we weren't very good. I mostly remember two-a-day practices in the summer and running up and down hills a lot in full pads.

I also remember sitting in the locker room before games—in full gear—while the coach gave a pep talk about sportsmanship and school pride. Then he would, inexplicably, dim the lights and fire up Queen's *We Are the Champions* while we sat, staring at the lockers, imagining the gridiron glory to come.

Why, in hindsight, are twenty-five ninth graders sitting in a dark locker room, on a Saturday morning at 9:30 am listening to a rock ballad by Queen, you might ask? It's an intriguing question. And I think hindsight provides the answer.

As I ponder that very strange chapter in my personal history, I can only conclude that the coach knew that explaining the virtues of fair play and school pride would only go so far. To really drive the point home, he needed to rely on something bigger than just words. He had to rely on art, on something bigger than the moment. We see this all the time in the world, of course. In an opera, we sing about love that's too big for regular words. When we need to express the sublime, we might fall back on poetry or a painting. Art attempts to express the ineffable in a way that plain talk can't. The coach could have just told us we were champions, but he understood that an 80s glam rock band would say it better.

My exegetical instinct tells me that the author of Matthew knew this to be true as well. Matthew has been banging on and on about how Christians need to live together in community. It occurs to me that Matthew could have made a list or said plainly what it is to have the kind of special community we are as the body of Christ. Instead, Matthew writes, "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." That is poetry my friends. That is Matthew trying to tell us that this thing we do—church, community, the Body of Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit—this following Jesus thing that we do with our lives—it's massively important. For real important. The MOST important. So important, it can only be talked about by invoking heaven.

What is so precious about this community Matthew is describing? It's radical for one thing. Early Christians must have seemed so very strange to the imperial powers all around them. They called each other sisters and brothers. They ate bread and drank wine and told the whole world that God was present in those elements. When there was strife in the community, they asked one another for forgiveness. They gave succor to the suffering, food to the hungry, clothes to the

naked, and hope to the hopeless. They were poor and not very popular, and yet they still told the world that God lived among them and that they had everything they needed.

This is, you have to admit, a little bit insane. Our spiritual foremothers and forefathers looked at the Roman Empire and said, “No. that is not the way that Jesus taught us to live.” Year after year, they gathered to read scripture, help the poor, and tell the stories of our faith. And every time two or three of them got together, they had the audacity to believe Jesus—to really believe that God lived among them in their work. I can see how that might inspire a poem or two.

Matthew’s poetic promise to them has not been diluted with time. It is here, today, for us. Just because we are separated from the early church by two thousand years doesn’t mean that this promise of Jesus’ presence when we gather together is somehow moot. The covenant between Jesus and his followers is just as much for us as it was for them.

What might happen if we were able to lean into the idea that God is really here with us, right now? What couldn’t we accomplish for the healing of the world if we were able to believe, just for a moment, that God meant what God said?

Even though it seems a little nuts in this modern age to talk about God and Jesus and the saints that have gone before, my money is on the teachings of Jesus in our Gospel this morning. This Jesus; this God who has promised to be among us, shows us a way to live that I don’t see out in the world. What we say to each other matters. How we solve conflicts in the Body of Christ matters. Who we help matters. This community matters. It matters because of Jesus who dwells among us, redeeming our souls and teaching us how to live.

The Gospel plays with the idea of what it means to win. We are strong when we are weak. We are proud when we are humble. We live when we die. We are the, not to put too fine a point on it, the champions—but not because we won some sports. Instead because of this tenacious God that is willing to be among us—even two thousand years later—guiding our community for the healing of this world. You, beloved people of St. Mark’s, really are champions, because you champion those at the edge of our society; you champion the hurting, the sick, the hopeless. You champion the covenant made between Jesus and the world over two thousand years ago. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am among them. Amen.