

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 9/10/2023, Matthew 18:15-20 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Our gospel reading from Matthew today provides guidance for dealing with conflict in a church community. But I was most struck by the last line in the reading: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." I thought of this line last Wednesday before my first mid-week Eucharist since January. At 9:47 no one had shown up for the 10 AM service, and I worried that no one would. The altar was set and bulletins printed. I knew that three of our regulars had various appointments and reasons for not coming, but there were others I had hoped to see.

And then Jane Brock pulled into the parking lot, and I remembered the time years ago—a late spring Wednesday morning in 2018—when Jane was the only person who came for the service. And we held it, the two of us, "because where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." So I knew if no one else showed up Jane would still be willing to share communion with me. But then eight more people came, and we had a meaningful service and study. They teased me for worrying that no one would come.

I've spent a lot of time alone in 2023 and cannot express how incredible it is to be back as a part of this community of worshippers. At the end of May and beginning of June, I began to believe that I would never be back, which makes this experience especially sweet.

I was struck last week by a gift that my current situation has given me. Before I had lung cancer, and before the pandemic, I used to stand at the back of the church and attempt to greet every person as they left church in the hope of grasping one fleeting moment of connection with everyone. This felt important, even as it never worked because some people left through other doors, and those who didn't often offered complaints about the temperature of the room or the fraction anthem or something wrong with the prayers of the people. Mostly people said "Nice sermon," even when I wasn't the preacher that day.

Because I now have one lung and must resist shaking hands with dozens of people each week according to my team of doctors, I no longer do that. But last week I found that when I was seated during coffee hour, I ended up having three conversations with people who sat next to me for a few moments that were rich and deep and could never have happened in the greeting line. So, this new normal of figuring out how to function differently has gifts. When someone sits down next to me for a few minutes, we sometimes connect a little more deeply.

Churches our size often center around a full-time pastor. I am no longer a full-time pastor. While I was away for seven and a half months, you all cared for each other. You were the church to each other. You worshipped together and studied the Bible. The choir continued to meet and sing. The sewing group continued to gather. Children were baptized. People who had never laid eyes on me joined our church. Long-term, much-loved members died, and services were held for them, care offered to their loved ones, prayers lifted up.

I cannot express how beautiful I find this. The work of the church did not stop because of my cancer treatment and absence. This is not the Church of Elizabeth, and it never has been. One of the things that drew me to St. David's thirteen years ago was how empowered the people of the

church are. This is reflected on the front page of our bulletin, where right after Jesus Christ as Head of the Church we list the People of St. David's, Ministers. I'm not the only minister here. We are all ministers by virtue of our baptism.

Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." We're smaller than we used to be, and we are not alone. People are writing about the so-called "great de-churching of America." People are deconstructing and disillusioned and studies show that rising numbers of pastors are considering leaving and some of them write articles too. So what does that mean for us?

I hope that the months I have been away have strengthened your love for St. David's. I confess that I was more nervous than excited about coming back, but that changed as soon as I saw the first Welcome Back Elizabeth button. I was overcome by how much I love it here, how much I experience God here.

I want to make sure that you are all aware that I am working less now than I did before. We reduced my hours to 30 hours a week back in 2021, primarily for financial reasons. I'm working even less now, 24 hours a week, primarily for my health. I'm not as physically strong as I used to be.

I've never thought of this as a physically demanding job, so I was stunned when, last Sunday at the 10 AM service, I struggled to make it through communion distribution. I pushed through it because I desperately longed to connect with every single person who had shown up on a holiday weekend after I had not seen you all for so long, and I learned that I need to sit during my sermon and the Eucharistic prayer to conserve energy. I hope I will grow stronger, but I need you all to understand that I am still in active cancer treatment, my cancer is no longer considered curable, and this may be as good as it gets.

There are gifts in this, because people who have trouble standing for prayers can see that we can still worship seated. We all have something to offer no matter what we can and can't do. I'm grateful that my fewer hours mean I can focus on worship on Sundays and Wednesdays and on Bible study. Those are things I'm specifically trained for and the reasons I became a priest. I'm going to attend fewer meetings, including diocesan meetings.

The past week has been one of the most fulfilling weeks I've experienced in ministry for this reason, and because I am so grateful being here at all, because I didn't think I would get to be up here again.

I know that going forward, my ministry with St. David's will be a little different, but I hope that it will continue to grow deeper. I hope that we will experience God together and serve Christ together. I'm blown away by all that happened in my absence, and I want to be a part of it now that I am back, but I know that I am not going to be the center of it all.

Some people believe that The Church is dying. I don't. I recognize that church is changing, but I think the Spirit is trying to drag us away from clericalism and mission statements and corporate lingo, back to basics like the Bible, sharing sacred meals together, and just being the body of Christ.