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Listening and Community in Virtual Times
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Matthew 18:20

I had not heard of Jonathan Warren Pagan, a priest in the Anglican Church of North America, a break off group from the Episcopal Church, until I stumbled across an article he wrote in the year 2014. He concluded the article with two sentences that reveal an issue he was struggling with: community in the 21st Century. He wrote: "The superficial connections we make via social media and Skype seem more enriching and engaging to us than the embodied connections we make in ordinary life. But detached from a robust embodied life, these virtual connections actually cause us to consume people rather than attend to them, and to God through them, and so to treat them as less than persons."

Other than the reference to Skype, which we could easily replace with Zoom, these two sentences speak a relevant and cautionary message to us in 2020 as we find ourselves challenged to practice or live into community in new and different ways. As we struggle to find new ways to connect during this pandemic which limits us as we've never been limited in our lifetimes and reveals uncomfortable truths about accepted inequalities in our society, it can be easy to ignore Pagan's warning and in so doing also overlook the original intentions the author of Matthew's Gospel had Jesus voice for the community of his followers. Which makes today's Gospel especially relevant in this unprecedented time.

At first glance that might not be obvious because it looks like Jesus is outlining an HR process for the Church. But when we look closely, today's Gospel isn't about complaining about someone who gets on your nerves, nor is this how to deal with an abuser or someone in an abusive situation, which would have to look much different because that would be a different kind of relationship. Today's Gospel is about the value of community, the role of community in the church, and the dynamic vitality of relationships where we find the Risen Jesus in any time.

Notice that Jesus instructed his followers if someone sins against them to go directly to that person in private. Not to write an open letter on social media, not to go to their supervisor or spouse, or complain about them behind their back. The problem is to be handled directly and respectfully instead of as a back handed powerplay to gain attention or humiliate or shame the other. The point, Jesus

seemed to infer, isn't necessarily reconciliation, the goal is to be listened to. Throughout what the author described in today's Gospel the emphasis is on being heard and listened to. Notice the person who sinned against the other is referred to as a member. It is only after the third refusal to listen that they are considered an offender who has rejected the ways of the community and thus rejects their membership in the community. Therefore, listening is an essential practice for a church community and listening requires vulnerability and honesty on the side of both parties.

That is how community is to look for followers of Jesus: honest and vulnerable. It is also how the church can be with each other and with its neighbors: open to hearing how people view the church in these days. I have heard individuals say the church causes harm by not officially participating in protest marches for equality, and that can be difficult to hear. We don't want to cause harm. I have also heard from a few of our neighbors who approached me in person to tell me they are so happy to see us gathering together outside for worship and move our Wednesday lunch and CrossRoads Café ministries outside. It gives them hope to see us embodying our faith in these ways, even if they don't join in. Simply seeing us together in-person gives them what they need. Not only is the later pleasant to hear, it goes back to the two sentences the ACNA priest wrote about his struggle with how to practice community.

Social media outlets like Facebook and video conferencing tools like Zoom lets us participate in virtual meetings and services that can seem engaging, especially when they are new. And when we are in a pandemic where we have to be very careful about where we gather and how long we are together and what type of activities we engage in that could potentially spread the COVID-19 virus and could cause harm to others, these tools can be a help and a blessing. But they can also be a detriment to the very community we are trying to maintain and grow. They require a different kind of listening and paying attention than when we gather in person, and there are studies showing too much virtual engagement can lead to fatigue and increased stress.

But Jonathan Warren Pagan suggests virtual engagement can lead to something far worse: dehumanization. Where we look at one another not as members of a community serving each other and our neighbors through the love of God in Christ, but as consumers and consumables. The danger with virtual gathering, Pagan hinted, is that through virtual engagement we become consumers instead of community.

Consumers are people or businesses or institutions who can decide what they are going to purchase and not purchase. Consumers are also those who consume, who eat up, guzzle, gobble, and devour. Consumerism is not a relationship of equals; it is a relationship of power where the one with the most resources has the power. This is not the relationship Jesus was describing in Matthew's Gospel today. I'm not saying it is wrong to participate in the economy and purchase the goods and services we need. Far from it. What I am saying is that when we unintentionally or intentionally think of people only as a source of our entertainment instead of listening to the point of a story or song or hymn, or as an opportunity to critique their speech or writing instead of listening to the message they are trying to convey, or when we think of a person only as the one who is to get a job done instead of listening to their ideas for care and growth of the parish, then we are not, as Jesus said, listening to each other.

Members of a church are not to be watchers only, but listeners engaged in the full dynamic of relationships, worship, and ministries. This is not easy, it can be complicated, it can be messy, and it might even be heartbreaking and disappointing at times. But, as Jesus also said in today's Gospel, it can be holy because that is where Jesus is and where he wants to be, in the middle of our relationships.

Throughout the Scriptures, whenever God showed up, God did not show up virtually from someplace else, God showed up incarnationally with a person or persons, manifesting in a voice, or a burning bush, or a pillar of fire or cloud, and of course in the Word made Flesh, Jesus who promises to be with us when and wherever we gather in his name.

There is much to be said about the last line in today's Gospel that contradicts the often popular notion that faith and spirituality are private matters between an individual and God, meant to be done in solitude in a person's home, or walking in the woods, or enjoying a drive on a nice day. I'm not saying these activities can't be moments where we recognize the presence of God in creation or in our personal life, but they aren't the same thing as the church Jesus was talking about.

Perhaps part of the problem is we tend to think too narrowly about what church is. Too many of us church is something you go to, consume the contents of a good liturgy, music, sermon, and coffee like a heavy meal and then go on our way. But that is not what Jesus described. He described church as more than liturgy, prayer, Eucharist, sacred music, and sermons. These things are important – even sacred - but they are not all church is. Church is active community, wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name. We gather in Jesus' name when we pray Morning Prayer together outside. We gather in Jesus' name when we distribute

lunch on Wednesdays. We gather in Jesus' name when Vestry meets, or when discussion groups meet to discuss scriptures or theology or issues or when two people meet to discuss personal issues. We gather in Jesus' name whenever we pray together, work together, worship together, serve our community together.

So, the question remains: Can we gather in Jesus' name virtually? I believe we can, especially for those who have health concerns that make being in-person during the pandemic, even with precautions a high risk situation for them. When we listen to the warnings about virtual experiences and remind ourselves of Jesus' presence as the love that binds us all together in our different places with our different levels of technological competence we can gain awareness of how to engage incarnationally via virtual means. When we understand virtual gathering is not intended to replace lively, embodied, incarnate, in-person community, but is only a temporary place holder until we can be incarnate with one another, I believe that is the beginning of finding a new way to honestly and authentically participate in community in this time. There is nothing virtual about the Word made Flesh, and that incarnation can manifest itself in communities large and small who meet to do the vulnerable work of paying attention to each other and listening to each other and to the Holy Spirit; and as we do this work, we might even do something far more powerful than consume. We might begin to imagine how to make our community and our world better than it was before the pandemic. However we gather, as long as we gather in Jesus' name, he promises to be where he wants to be: right here with us, manifesting the love of God on earth.