

Children

Good morning, boys and girls: Oil is a wonderful thing. We couldn't run most of the machinery in the world without oil. Oil is a wonderful thing as long as we can control it. Some of you know about the terrible oil spill in Alaska sometime back. Millions of gallons of oil spilled into the Alaska waters and fouled the beaches and endangered wildlife. Did you know that thousands of Atlantic sea birds die needlessly each year due to the careless spillage of oil from ocean going ships. Tests have proven that a drop of oil no larger than a quarter will work its way through the plumage of a bird. It will mat the feathers and interfere with the wings and eventually cause slow but certain death from exposure and starvation. Anger and resentment are like that. All of us get mad from time to time. People do things to hurt us or upset us. That's perfectly natural. But if we hold on to our anger, it works kind of like oil in a bird's feathers. It works its way up into something that hurts us and may end up hurting others. The best thing we can do when people hurt us or upset us is to go to them and try to make friends. A little anger can't be helped, but it always needs to be gotten rid of as soon as possible before any lasting damage is done.

I

How many times a day does a Muslim pray? How many times a day should a Catholic pray? The number 5 is symbolic. Four pillars hold up the earth, four winds cover the Earth, so five is to provide us with more than enough support and cover everything in our lives. We should pray when we get up and when we go to sleep and at each meal. I am reminded of a story of a pastor in a drought-stricken part of Alabama a couple of summers ago who implored his people to pray for rain. In fact, he asked each member of the church to join in a prayer vigil that would continue day and night until God granted their request.

Never had there been a greater sense of urgency in that church than was revealed over the next few days. At any hour, one might pass that small rural church and find the lights on and someone at the altar praying.

Finally late Wednesday evening some dark clouds began to roll in. Soon rain began falling in torrents. For four straight days it rained without ceasing. The creeks began overflowing their banks. It became necessary to evacuate people from their homes. Still the water kept rising. The entire community was now under water.

As rescue workers made their way in a boat through the perilous floodwater evacuating the last reluctant stragglers, one of the boats passed that little country church, now almost completely submerged. There sat the pastor on the roof of the church with a look of grand satisfaction on his face. He could be heard saying to himself as he surveyed the flood waters around him, "Not bad for a small church like ours. Not bad." (1)

Jesus said, "if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father.." That is a stunning endorsement of corporate prayer. It is important that we pray, but it is even more important that we pray together. We are a community. Better yet, we are a family. This saying of Jesus is part of a larger passage that emphasizes the importance of love among believers.

A missionary in India, Ruth Seabury, had one time with a Hindu social worker. At one point, the social worker asked Ruth, "Do you think that most Christians know what they've got?"

Perplexed by the question, she asked what he had in mind.

He said, "Every religion has a god. Every religion has an altar. Every religion has worshipers. Every religion believes in sacrifice. But only Christians have a Savior and only Christians have a congregation."

That's a good question for us to ask ourselves, "Do we know what we've got?" Of course, we are grateful we have a Savior. However, it is impossible to overstate the importance of the congregation as well. We are not simply an assembly of individuals. We are the body of Christ. He has called us into a sacred community. He has called us to be his own family.

We see in this passage, first of all, that in the family of Christ we are responsible for one another. "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone."

This is a tough teaching of our Lord. It is one that is often overlooked because many of us shy away from confrontation of any kind. "Live and let live" is our creed. And yet, confronting a fellow believer who is involved in a sin of any kind can be the most loving thing, the most Christ-like thing, we can do.

In this passage Christ is calling us as a community to hold one another accountable for our behavior. Christ is not calling us to pass judgment on one another, but to care enough about one another to intervene if we see a friend is about to make a serious mistake.

A well-known Christian author tells of praying for a friend whom she knew had become involved in an extra-marital affair. One Sunday she happened to be sitting behind her friend in church. During the prelude, she leaned forward and put her hands lovingly on her friend's shoulders and whispered, "Be careful that you don't throw away something very beautiful. I'm praying for you."

The friend involved in the affair began weeping softly and almost immediately broke off this illicit relationship. Years later the Christian author attended a high school graduation. One of the young people graduating was the son of the woman who had been having the affair. This woman came up to the author and gave her a big hug. "You were so right," she said with gratitude. "If you had not spoken those words to me that day, I would have thrown away nearly everything that was important to me. Thank you so much."

Can you see what a loving act that was? Can you see the tragedies this act possibly prevented?

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. Don't make a big deal of it. Do it in a loving manner. Keep the conversation between the two of you forever confidential. But friends do not let friends ruin their lives.

What an important passage of scripture. And yet, quite honestly, this would be very difficult for most of us to do. It requires a great deal of love. It also requires a great deal of courage.

"Too often we confuse love with permissiveness. It is not love to fail to dissuade another believer from sin any more than it is love to fail to take a drink away from an alcoholic or matches away from a baby.

we need to see is the power of a praying church. Jesus says, “if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father..”

What an amazing statement. I will be the first to admit that I do not fully understand what Christ is saying to us with these words, but I do know there is much power when Christian people work together, pray together, laugh together and shed tears together. That has always been the strength of the Christian movement.

A Roman historian named Lucian, writing in the first century, describes a man called Peregrinus who was in prison and seems to have claimed to be a Christian, though he was probably a bit of a fraud. Nevertheless, Christians in his community visited him in jail regularly.

“They show,” Lucian writes, “incredible speed whenever such public action is taken, for their [leader] (Jesus) persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another.”

Does it matter if modern day Christians look out for one another? Recent studies indicate that only one man in five in America today has a real friend. Only one in five! If I considered myself to be a spiritual peddler, I would say, “What a market!” What an opportunity! We have what the world desperately needs and cannot supply. We have a Savior and we have Christian love and fellowship. We may not be articulate theologians but we can be a friend to one another and to the world outside.

That is our task. That is the ministry to which Christ has called us--to be a caring community. To reach out arms of sympathy and support to those who are in distress. To rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep.

Kahlil Gibran once remarked that we can forget those with whom we have laughed, but we can never forget those with whom we have cried. Millions of persons who have been through trying times and have felt the support of one or two other brothers or sisters in Christ will testify to the power of that support.

We also grow together as a praying Church. Hopefully, you don't treat Mass as a fast food service. Come in, Partake quickly and get out. Get to know the people around you. You are fellow Catholics. We are a minority in the Army. We are constantly challenged to be like everyone else. No disrespect to the Protestants because they are doing what they believe. But we believe in the power of corporate prayer. This is why we have Mass every day One half hour of time. We support those at home and those here with us. Prayer works. In Oklahoma to disprove the power of prayer. They did a study of hospital patients. They had a group of patients who were introduced to people who would pray for them during their stay. They had another group and there was no mention of prayer nor were there people praying for them. They had another group which nothing about prayer was mentioned to the patients but they had people praying for them. The intent of the study was to show that people who knew they were being prayed for would have a quicker recovery rate, but the other two would not. Showing it is all psychological. The end result was yes that group had a quicker rate but so did the group that didn't know they were being prayed for. Together in prayer we can change the lives of the people around us. By talking to those in sin and praying for them, we can save them.

What a grand opportunity Christ has given us. We are responsible for one another. There is much power in a church that is united in prayer and service to one another. There is, of course, a reason for that.

The body of Christ is much more than the sum of its individual parts, for where two or three gather in Christ's name, there he is there with them. That is the crowning conclusion to this passage. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." The whole meaning of Christian faith is contained in the word, relationship--a relationship with God and a relationship with one another. As Frederick Buechner has written: "Faith is not so much believing this thing or that about God as it is hearing a voice which says, 'Come unto Me.' We hear the voice and then we start to go without really knowing what to believe either about the voice or about ourselves. And yet we go. Faith at this point is standing in the darkness, and a hand is there, and we take it."

To expand on Buechner's analogy, we take the hand of God and then we reach out in the darkness and we take hold of the hand of a neighbor. That is who we are and what we are about.

A Christian man who knew his time was near. So he sent word to his family to come home so he could see them all one last time. Even though his children had already had families of their own, they all set out on the trips back home. After they had been home awhile visiting, the father called all of them into his room for he had been bedfast for weeks.

When they entered and formed a line around his bed so he could see all, he then told them to go outside and bring back a nice-size stick. Now this sounded strange, but seeing the shape their father was in, they each went out in the yard and brought back a big stick. After everyone got their stick they all gathered around the old man. He then told them to start breaking the sticks one by one. After everyone broke their stick he then told them to go back outside and get another stick.

Now this had seemed very odd to his children but they did what they were told because, after all, their father was about to be with the Lord. After they got a stick and gathered around his bed, he told them this time to pass the sticks around in one stack and bring them to him. When they had done this he pulled out some fishing line and told them to tie the bundle tightly at each end. Then he told his children to try and break the sticks. One by one they all tried to break the bundle of sticks but could not do it. The father responded by saying, "I just want you to know if you stick together it will be harder to break you." (4)

What is true of a family is true of a church as well. The closer we are to Christ and the closer we are to each other, the greater impact we will have on our world.

A rural pastor sits on top of his partially submerged church and says proudly, "Not bad for a small church like ours." Do we know what we have? We have what the world desperately needs--a Savior and a congregation. "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love . . ."

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1. Source unknown.
 2. *Being the Body* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004).
 3. (Chosen Books, 2008).
 4. <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/sticking-together-david-utley-sermon-on-unity-39763>.

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You heard the kids stirring this morning. You opened your eyes. *It can't be morning already. It's Sunday, I have to get them dressed.* You wash up. You get the kids washed up. You throw the paper inside and try to keep the kids from killing each other over who gets the comics first. You get some breakfast on and get some coffee in yourself and cereal in the kids. You look at the clock. 8:45 already! "Get the kids in the car, we've got to go." You drive down your street. You seem to be one of the few families stirring. Everyone else is going to have a relaxing breakfast. It hits you. We are in a minority on our block. We are one of the few families that goes to Church Sunday morning.

Five of you made the trip to corporate headquarters in Phoenix. The second night four of the others found dates; three of them are married, but their view is what their spouses did not know wouldn't hurt them. So you go to a movie and it is so clear to you, "I wouldn't even think of cheating; yet, I'm in the minority."

You are among ninety-six of the most brilliant college graduates who have been accepted to a particular medical school. Your excitement includes finally getting to study to be a doctor; as well as the new way you have to frame your life with an off campus apartment in a quiet area so you can study in the few hours you are not in class. You ask for the location of the nearest Church and find that there are only three others of the 96 who even believe in God. You are in the minority.

Most of the people in the office you work in do go to Church. About half of them are Catholic. You are shocked when someone talks about abortion and says, "Well, I'm Catholic, but I don't go along with what the Church is saying on abortion." Everyone else seems to be agreeing with the person. You are in the minority.

The sociology teacher in the high school asks, "How many of your families are active members of some Church or synagogue?" Less than ten of the 35 in the class raise their hands. You suddenly realize that you are in the minority.

Perhaps some of these situations or others like them have occurred in your life. Perhaps they occur frequently. Perhaps you have wondered, "Why am I the one in the minority. Why am I getting up early on Sunday morning when the rest are sleeping in? Why am I the one who is alone at the movie when others are out having a good time? Why am I the only one in Med School who structures Church into my crowded week? Why am I the only one who accepts the Church's teaching on abortion? Why is my family the only family going to Church?"

When questions like this disturb us, we have to remember, *Jesus never promised that we would be in the majority. He just promised that he would be with us always.*

The Gospel of Matthew revolves around this very theme. Jesus is with us, even if we seem to be just a small, insignificant number. In the beginning of *Matthew*, Jesus is called Emmanuel, the name that means, "God is with his people." The last words of the gospel are "Know that I am with you even until the end of time." Moreover, in the

middle of the Gospel we have the concluding words of today's reading. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

We go to Church because we believe in Jesus Christ. We believe in his presence in Word and Sacrament. We need his presence in our families. We come to Church to get our spiritual batteries charged with the grace of his scriptural and sacramental presence. We come so we can have the courage to make it through another week, especially if we are called upon to stand for our faith. We come so we can pray, *"Lord, my life is difficult at times, but you called us to marriage, you made me a father or mother, help me to answer your call well."* We come to pray for others, *"Lord, may the people on my block nourish the place you must have in their families. Lord, may the people at work learn to honor, value, and respect their marriages. Lord, may the others in med school learn that without you, medicine is a science without direction, Lord, may other Catholics stand behind your spirit in the Church, and Lord, may my family and the families of all in my high school class grow closer to you."* And we come to receive the grace to live our lives in a way that proclaims the presence of the Lord on earth.

Our Church is big, but there are not many attending Mass in comparison to those who won't attend Church. We are, and will always be in the minority. But Jesus Christ never promised us that we would be in the majority. He just promised that he would be with us always.

III

In 2013, Swedish DJ Avicii wrote the highest charting dance track of the decade, "Wake Me Up!" You can find the song on youtube along with an accompanying music video.

The lyrics about living a dream and waking up to realize a new and better reality were written by Avicii as a result of his success, which thrust him into a life he never imagined. The video took the lyrics further however, suggesting that we all need to leave behind those places and people who don't accept us for who we are in order to embrace new people and new places where we are loved and fit in. This is what it means to live true to ourselves.

The music video depicts a foreign woman and young girl living in a small, bland town, in which the local townspeople look at them with disdain and disapproval, and they are not loved and accepted for who they are. The disapproving town is depicted in black and white. One night, the woman rides a horse to the city, in which she experiences love and joy and acceptance there among the young people attending an Avicii concert. They dance and enjoy each other. Afterwards, she rides back to retrieve the child, and they move to the city with the local townspeople staring after them.

If Paul lived today, I imagine he would have loved that song, for Paul spends significant time in his letter to the Roman Church, trying to convince them to live in harmony, to wake up to new life in Jesus, to behave like a more harmonious and loving people.

Whether you look at Avicii's video or Paul's dilemma in the church as a generational issue or simply as a Christ vs culture issue, the message is the same: we are called to

love each other. We were created to “dance” the dance of life with each other in joy and harmonious difference.

When we don't, life will become drab, our judgments black and white, and our existence dark and colorless. Paul says, “It's time to wake up! And put on Christ! To put on the armor of Light.”

Living in the light for Paul suggests not only authenticity and transparency, but living color, truth, seeing each other for who we are, and accepting each other in love. And Christ is that light.

To treat each other with disrespect is to hide in the darkness and cover up our biases. To live “honorably as in the day” is to put jealousy and envy and quarreling aside, and to treat each other with love and respect.

Paul realized that in order to create a true church, people needed to bond together in “harmonious difference.” The early church was a new blend of all kinds of people, Jews, Gentiles, Greeks, Foreigners. They were very different people, coming from very diverse cultures and practices. The only thing binding them together was their belief in Jesus and their faith in the truth of the resurrection and Christ's salvation promise.

Like Jesus, Paul sums up all of the commandments of God with the simple line: “love one another.” If you do that, it will cover every sin, Paul suggests.

When we “put on” Christ, that is where the Light of Christ's love like a mantel over us and within us, we cannot help but speak and act in love toward everyone around us.

To “wake up” is to come out of the dark place where we have been living not even knowing we were in the dark and into the new Light of Christ's truth and love, which will change us and influence us to harmonious living.

When Jesus gathered his first disciples together, he did not look for like-minded people. But he chose disciples from a wide range of places, cultures, mindsets, and occupations: rowdy fishermen, devout Jews, tax collectors, Sicarii, Greek, those from within and without the system. In everyday life, these men would have despised each other, would never have spoken let alone spent time together. And yet Jesus taught them to become brothers, a team, to respect each other, to place their minds and hearts on something higher than their political affiliations, their economic status, their judgments, and their cultures: God's mission and loving God's people. In three years, Jesus transformed this motley crew into a super evangelistic machine who would build a church and heal a multitude.

Each and every church in each and every place in the world is still like those first disciples. Seldom will you ever find a church that is singularly the same. More than not, your church is filled with people with diverse backgrounds, opinions, affiliations, and beliefs. And yet one thing holds them all together: Christ, crucified, risen, and coming again.

Have you ever made salad dressing? I mean on your own? To do that, you need to take oil, vinegar, water, spices, and perhaps some lemon juice or orange juice, and you shake it and blend it up to create a unique dressing.

The Church of Jesus Christ is just like that. We take people from all walks of life, all ranges of ideas and we put them together ...and we shake things up. The more you shake things up, the more diverse and creative ideas, the more pizzazz your church will have! It takes a unique blend to do the work of Christ in the world in new and unique ways. It takes continually adding and trying new ingredients, and bringing in new ideas and new people in order to serve the tastes of every culture.

Paul is Jesus' best evangelist not just because he parrots what he says. But because he dares to try to live it out by building a church modeled on Jesus' ideas of extreme diversity and universal love. The thing is, Paul succeeded.

The church is not perfect. No church is. And like oil and water, we constantly need to strive to put on Christ and love the way that He wanted us to love, with determination, energy, commitment, and intention.

But when we do, we will find ourselves living the kind of life we never dreamed could be true.

So wake up people of God!

Time to stop sleeping and to re-invent the church, Christ's church –the place where everyone is welcome, accepted, loved, and where joy is found and innovation flourishes.

That's the Church Jesus intended.

ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., by Lori Wagner