
The Church Is A Symphony!

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 18, Year A

"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" (Matthew 18:19-20).

"If two of you agree on earth, it will be done for you in heaven."

Wow, what amazing words those are. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. ... If two of you agree on earth, it will be done for you in heaven." These declarations have been used to describe the Church, at our most ideal: coming together in Jesus' name, agreeing together.

If we agree together (we say), we can achieve great things. So we have spent years trying to get people to agree with each other. Many leaders strive to get us to believe things in the same way, to act in the same way, to bow and sing and pray in the same way. And, most of the time, we don't. We disagree, and we don't do things in the same way.

"Where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, there will be difference among them!"

I have realized something powerful in my years as a parish priest, and in my study of these powerful words from the Gospel of Matthew. It has to do with the definition of the word, "agree."

What does it mean to "agree" with something?

One sense is that if I agree with something, that something "pleases" me. It gives me pleasure. That chocolate cake "agrees" with me; it gives me pleasure. And if I "agree" with a person, this agreement gives me pleasure. That old meaning, however, has developed further when applied to our opinions and doctrines. Now, we say that, if our opinion or belief statement is only exactly the same as that of another person, do we "agree" with that person.

Okay. Well and good. But it is not the way this gospel passage, from Matthew, speaks of "agree." Here in Matthew 18:19, Jesus uses a special word when he says, "if two of you *agree* on earth..., it will be done for you ...in heaven."

The word that we translate as "agree" is really the Greek word, "symphoneo." Now, that word sounds a lot like another word we use in English, doesn't it? Yes! It is the same word as "symphony!" "Sum" means "together;" and "phonos" means "sound." A symphony, then, is sounds coming together.

When Jesus says that "if two of you 'agree' on earth, it will be done for you in heaven," he is using the word "symphoneo."

"Symphoneo," in Greek, gets translated into English as "agree." But what it really means is:

Sol Sol Sol Me
Fa Fa Fa Re!

It means symphony! In this passage, the word for agree is essentially the word, "symphony."

*Sol Sol Sol Me
Fa Fa Fa Re*

Wow. And what is a symphony? It is an elaborate musical piece of many, different notes! Many different rhythms and measures and themes and melodies. And not everyone plays, or sings, the same note!

Jesus is describing the effective church, where people come together in his name, as a symphony! If a church is to be in "agreement," in the way that the Bible speaks of "agreement," the church will be like a symphony. Not everyone plays, or sings, the same note! And even if two instrumentalists do play the same note, they are played in different rhythms!

And, yet, the piece holds together. It is in agreement. It gives the world the agreeable pleasure of harmony and direction. That is a model for the Church, too!

I was playing in a jazz ensemble a few years ago, a jazz combo really. Many of you know that I enjoy playing jazz piano. But this group was fine. They were all so accomplished, especially our leader, our director.

He applauded my skills, which I liked to hear, but then he said, "you are playing too many notes." My countenance fell. He was right. I was playing too many notes, and some of them were the notes that were meant for the bass player. I was not fitting in to the piece at all.

What he meant was, "Find the notes that fit you into the piece. Some play one note, and others play another note! Pay attention to the various voicings, the way that some notes can be re-arranged, and some notes used sparingly, and some notes played only at the exact time they are useful.

It is the secret of jazz. Duke Ellington, the bandleader and master pianist, was excellent at it. He led his band from the piano, sometimes playing only the most minimal of notes, but playing them exactly when they were needed, and no more than necessary. His was a big band, full of improvisation, with different sounds sounding together.

Solos are wonderful! Virtuosos are wonderful! For sure. Concertos for virtuosos are wonderful! But symphonies are different. Symphonies occur when everyone is in agreement. Yes, a symphony occurs – "sym-phonos" – when different sounds sound together. A symphony is different sounds coming together in effective harmony.

Jesus calls us to a church where two or three are in agreement together. But the word is "symphony." The healthy and effective churches, the beautiful churches, are not those where everyone is playing the same note!

Another way to say this is that the Church is not supposed to be "Johnny One-Note." The Church is not supposed to be monotone. It is not supposed to be everyone playing the same thing. Instead, Christians of the same Church are playing different notes. They are singing different lines. They are moving in different rhythms! Churches are different notes, different lines, different rhythms, and all in harmony. Not everyone is going to sing the same line you are singing. (And, please tell the lamenting altos that we need them!)

You realize, of course, that I am not talking only about singing. I am also talking about your special gift, your talent, your interest, your particular ministry in church. Not everyone is going to join your special ministry or group or guild or class. It might be a fantastic ministry or group or guild or class, you are trumpeting. Wonderful! But not everyone will join your specific melody. That is okay!

So it is that this church, the Cathedral of St. Philip, is many voices and rhythms. We are a Cathedral Farmers Market, but not everyone sings that line. Some of us will participate in a Bible Study on the Song of Solomon, but not everyone will sing that song! Some of us will minister in the Thrift House, or in the Requiem Eucharist for the Homeless. Some of us will support the Counseling Center, or the Cathedral Music program, or an education program; but not everyone will.

Some of the rest of us will be singing another line, another rhythm, somewhere else in this grand community of faith. We do not all have to be doing the same thing in order to be in agreement.

And that diversity, that broad arrangement of gifts and treasures, is how the Church changes the world. In the name of Jesus, a loving and caring and generous Jesus, we agree with a tremendous variety of ministries; and we do not, personally, have to be in lockstep with every one of them.

The Church that Jesus calls us to is not a monotone church. We do not have to all be singing the same monotonous line, over and over again. We can present Jesus, the Christ, in all manner of diversity and variety.

We can present Jesus, the Christ, as a symphony, a symphony of beautiful and different sounds, all sounding together, for the salvation of the world.

AMEN.

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