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“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them” *Matt 18:20).

Ezek 9:1-7; 10:18-22; Matt 18:15-20

Today’s Gospel appears to address conflict in the early church by applying some of the sayings of Jesus about forgiveness. Matthew writes for a community made up of both Jewish and Gentile converts, and despite Jesus’ emphasis on reconciliation, situations were arising that required intervention and mediation that did not always resolve the problem. If quarrels threatened to divide the community, it was sometimes better to eject people from the group. What came to be known as “excommunication,” especially over theological questions, was already a factor in the early church.

Because reconciliation is part of the mission of the church, internal division has always been a serious problem. Historically, the conflicts that continued to split the church into numerous sects, traditions and denominations have been one of greatest obstacles to Christian witness. Ecumenical dialogue is an ongoing project quietly trying to bridge numerous gaps in theology and institutional cooperation.

Today’s passage ends with some of the most reassuring words of Jesus about what it takes to be the church. If even two believers can agree on something, their prayer will be answered. If even two or three gather in the name of Jesus, he will be with them. This promise affirms the vision captured in one of e. e. cummings’ best-known poems, “i am a little church,” which describes the power of an ordinary seeker to live the mystery of God’s presence in the world.

i am a little church(no great cathedral)

far from the splendor and squalor of hurrying cities

-i do not worry if briefer days grow briefest,

i am not sorry when sun and rain make April

The great resilience of the Gospel is that it exists in every heart that welcomes it, and it survives even when institutional attempts to organize its mission falter and fail to live up to its spirit. Believers have had a chance to experience being little churches during the pandemic. The need for community has been obvious, but the

essentials of faith must be held by each of us to inform what we become together. The longing to be together is itself the fruit of a personal renewal of the heart that has been going on for many during this difficult time of separation. Jesus is the center that holds us together, and he is always available wherever there is prayer and even small groups gathering in his name.

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