

Proper 18a: 9/10/17  
The Rev. Dee Anne Dodd  
St. Paul's, Wallingford CT

*Jesus said, "For when two or three are gathered in my name,  
I am there among them."*

Earlier this year, James "Mad Dog" Mattis,  
Marine General,  
US Secretary of Defense,  
was asked what worried him most.  
What do you think he might say? North Korea? Russia? ISIS?

Here's what he said:  
"The lack of...unity in America.  
The lack of a fundamental friendliness.  
It seems like an awful lot of people in America and around the world  
feel spiritually and personally alienated,  
whether it be from organized religion or  
from local school districts or from their government."

Mattis is not alone in his concerns.  
As Vestry members can attest, I send them articles about  
this phenomenon of dramatically declining church attendance and  
its impact not just on the way we do church,  
but on society at large.  
And we're finding that writers both religious and secular  
agree with General Mattis that the impact is negative –  
again, not just for the church as an institution,  
but for the way we live together as a civil society.

In fact, it's right here in church (and other faith communities)  
where we learn to *be* civil.  
We're thrown together with folks we might not be otherwise.  
Folks who aren't blood relatives who become as family to us.  
Red-hot Republicans, red-hot Democrats, and those  
who don't know (or care) what they are, together,  
united for a larger purpose.

And once we get here, what do we hear?  
 Week after week of scripture, like today's epistle,  
 that tells us to "love our neighbor as ourselves."  
 Like today's Gospel, which tells us that conflict is best handled  
 through direct communication –  
 not parking lot meetings, or gossip or posting nasty comments  
 on social media,  
 but looking right at a person,  
 recognizing the good in them – the Christ in them –  
 and talking *to* (not about) them.

We come here to hear commandments  
 to welcome the stranger, the immigrant, the widow and orphan.  
 Stories of Jesus embracing the other,  
 showing that there's no such thing as an outcast here.

All of which makes an event like this Ingathering  
 all the more important.  
 A chance to mix it up with folks from different services,  
 members of your own church you might not even know!  
 Old and young together, with church school not yet in session.  
 Coming back together after a summer scattered,  
 and inviting some new friends to join our motley crew.

The world needs us to practice what we preach here.  
 The world needs us to get outside ourselves and serve others.  
 Get to know others and see the deepest humanity in them,  
 what we as Christians call Christ.

So let's do it.  
 Let's practice what we as Christians preach,  
 what we hear preached in scripture this and every week.  
 Let's practice some of that "fundamental friendliness"  
 General Mattis says is so vital to our well-being and safety.

*[Hold up card.]*

You saw this coming, didn't you?  
 It's one of those days when I'm asking you to mix it up a bit.  
 No one's going to force you to come up front or speak into the mic.

All I'm asking is that you find a person or two you don't know whose card matches yours – someone from the other service or a visitor or a child or who knows.

And when your group of two or three is gathered, all you have to do is smile, tell each other your name and one thing – *one thing* – you have going on in the week ahead. It doesn't have to be earth-shattering (although it can be). Maybe it's the first full week of school, or having lunch with a friend. Maybe it's something medical, or a project around the house. No need to go into a lot of details – no time for that. Just share a little of yourself in gatherings of two or three. And you know what? You just might become aware that you're not spiritually or personally alienated because Jesus is there with you.

*[Chaos ensues as people walk around church, get in groups, chat.]*

Jesus was there with you in your gathered group of two or three. Jesus is with us now. And we're here this and every Sunday to remind one another that we're here for each other and for this world God so loves. Yes, Jesus is with us here and everywhere we go throughout the week.

Thanks be to God. **AMEN.**