

Let us pray... God of wonder, you are holy. Create a space for holiness in our lives. Usher your Spirit in our midst. Inspire and transform us. May we find compassion, and may we share your grace and forgiveness with others... Amen.

It is such a joy to celebrate Rally Sunday with all of you today, to bless our youth ministry and the many children who come through our doors.

Because being in community and finding Jesus is worth celebrating...

And today we find out how important it is to do just that...

By finding ways to be with one another, by holding space for each other, and by welcoming others... Even through the difficult situations in life.

Even when there has been conflict, disagreement, or misunderstanding.

Which is specific to our gospel today...

And yet, the most well-known part of our gospel is often taken out of context, and ignores what Jesus is really getting at.

As most people remember Jesus saying, where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

As a comforting statement... Isolating this verse to mean that Jesus is with us whenever we gather in his name...

And while this is true... This isn't the focus for today... As this gospel is rooted in conflict and forgiveness...

Which means that Jesus is saying, whenever we gather together in conflict, in disagreement, in difficult situations and circumstances, that he is present with us...

And not only is Jesus' present with us; he also walks us through the proper steps of conflict resolution...

He does not promote spreading rumors or triangulation.

Instead, he says we need to talk to the person, and if need be, talk to them with others, and if need be, talk to them with the congregation...

And if none of those things work, then we are to treat them like we do gentiles and tax collectors...

Now if you have been paying attention to what Jesus does with gentiles and tax collectors... You will remember that Jesus welcomes them, he eats with them, and shares his time and food with them...

So, when Jesus says, he is gathered among us... He means that he is quite literally beside us when we are gathered together in conflict...

Which is meant to challenge our behavior... And is also a reminder of God's unconditional grace.

First, it is meant to challenge our behavior, because when arguments get heated people can say and do some pretty mean things.

I know I have said things when I have been upset that I wish I wouldn't have.

And I'm guessing if Jesus was physically sitting in the room with me, I probably wouldn't have said those things...

Which is why we need the reminder, that Jesus is with us...

Not that Jesus is trying to take away our emotions or our anger... As everyone is allowed to feel those things... Everyone is allowed to be a complete human and is meant to experience and express our human emotions...

Instead, Jesus invites us to reframe our mindset...

By holding ourselves and others accountable. By treating ourselves and others with respect.

Which can be hard to do, especially when emotions are high...

Which is why we need to be reminded that Jesus is there, not only for accountability but also for grace...

Grace we can embrace by turning to God in prayer...

Because taking a time out, especially for prayer when things are heated, can help...

By taking a few conscious breaths, welcoming God's grace and stillness.

Taking a deep breath is an act of self-care, and it leaves space for us to remember that we are not the only ones in the room...

Not only is Jesus with us, but the Spirit is alive and at work in our midst...

But in order for the Spirit to work we need to allow space... So, we can be open to transformation.

And as a community of faith, we are called to cultivate those spaces of growth.

We are called to leave space for silence, for prayer, and for transformation.

Which we do together every Sunday during worship.

But as we all know, so much of our lives take place outside of worship...

Where life gets real...

Times when we are at our best and times when we are not.

Because everything we do, even if we are on autopilot, is a part of our lives.

Where we are accountable for how we treat others.

But even when we mess up, when we show up completely broken and flawed, we are still met with God's grace and forgiveness.

So, we can share that same grace and forgiveness with others...

Because God's grace opens us up in ways that are beyond what we can do ourselves.

God's grace allows us to approach difficult situations with a sense of curiosity and wonder... Instead of jumping to judgment and closed mindedness.

God's grace allows space for a variety of opinions and thoughts, embracing diversity and finding goodness in it all.

Because no matter how broken and flawed we are, we are also beautiful and loved.

Despite all we have done and left undone, we are graced.

And even though grace doesn't erase the pain or the harm we have caused or the pain we have received...

We have the transformative power of God's grace

Because grace is mysterious... It meets us where we are at, but it does not leave us where we were found.

It allows us to see beauty and love in the difficult places, in the most ordinary of spaces, in the mundane, and in the messiness of life...

Because all of those things make up life and they take up many moments of our lives.

And our lives are precious and are worth celebrating...

God wants you to remember that...

Even when you have a crummy day... Even when things are hard...

There is always some goodness in our midst... Because Christ is with us.

Pouring out goodness found in God's love, and goodness that I have seen time and time again, in this community.

And being in community and finding Jesus is worth celebrating...

Even when we have to work through things together...

Which we will have an opportunity to do later today, during our potluck meeting.

Because together we make up this church...

Together we deepen our faith and continue to grow by welcoming others into our hearts...

Together we are held in Christ and in one another, so that we can face the challenges of life, both inside and outside these walls, with strength and grace... Amen.