

14th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.6.20

Matthew 18:15-20

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (175)

Matthew, our gospel writer, really seems to believe in the Church.

He’s the only gospel writer of all four who wrote of the Church *per se*. A gathered body for worship and study, an institution for the passing on from one generation to the next the way of Christ, this ekklesia, as Matthew called it, is only to be found here, in this gospel. Luke imagines a people gathered by the power of the Holy Spirit, but he never talks of it as having a name. Mark doesn’t imagine any such thing at all, and John spends most of his time considering who Jesus was and is, and what that implies about us and the world and God. Only Matthew imagines the Church.

What’s more, he seems to really believe in the Church.

Twice now he’s remembered Jesus to have said this rather astonishing thing, that whatever the Church binds on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever the Church lets loose in the world will be on the loose in heaven. This means that the Church has influence on the kingdom of God, that the practices and habits and effects of the Church in the world, and amidst the Church among its members, all impress themselves on the eternal reign of God.

As above, so below, goes the bit of pop wisdom. As below, so above, goes Matthew’s understanding of Jesus’ understanding of the Church.

This is very intimidating—to me, at least. That what we’re doing here has the potential to play out eternally? That what grooves of habit we wear into here might continue to bear us round and round in the fullness of time that is eternity? Yikes. We better get this right.

I was surprised recently in coming across someone else who seemed likewise really to believe in the Church. I was reading a textbook I bought used online, a collection of essays and images published in 1970 entitled *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*. The contributing writers are mostly European, many now deceased. The editor, Gillo Dorfles, was Italian; others were Austrian, German, British. All were artists of various media. All were also art and social critics set amidst a post-authoritarian aesthetic. Each were creating amidst the wrecks of some authoritarian political arrangement—fascism, Nazism, and Soviet Communism. And they didn't like what they saw. Authoritarian culture makes for really bad art.

As it happens, it also depends on really bad art. These (fascism, Nazism, Soviet Communism) were, and are, political arrangements that depend upon and exploit kitsch—kitsch, which is a whole aesthetic, is more than just the tacky dust-collectors you've brought home from your various travels. (Or was that just me?) It is rather a whole realm. Brought to us by the mass production of things, many of which things take form but have no actual function, or takes a form explicitly *other* than its function (a liquor bottle that looks like a big book! A heart-shaped bathtub!), kitsch offers an appearance of something real that has no true reality. It stirs up sentiment with no actual depth of feeling or commitment. It generates memories of things that never actually were. And it commodifies everything, so that actual art and actual experience become products, and then by-products, several times removed from the human touch, spirited connection, or creative expression. It's dehumanizing, which authoritarians find beguiling.

Incidentally, I was reading this book on the hunch that what Trump offers isn't a politics as much as it is an aesthetic, and that aesthetic is kitsch, which some people really, really go for—with a vengeance it would seem.

Kitsch is the mode of skilled mimicry, fine-tuned imitation, technically precise copying—and it's all around us. Said to be famously hard to define, kitsch is so (I think) only because it's all around us. Kitsch is where we live, such that we have to struggle to encounter immediacy, actuality, reality, creativity, truth.

Not following?

So, here's a take that will have almost everyone will hate me. The Cloisters, in Fort Tryon Park, on the northern tip of Manhattan: kitsch, just very convincing kitsch.

Governed by the Metropolitan Museum, The Cloisters are a configuration of ruins, reproductions, and confabulations that are, according to Wikipedia, “centered around four cloisters...purchased by American sculptor and art dealer George Grey Barnard, dismantled in Europe between 1934 and 1939, and moved to New York. They were acquired for the museum by financier and philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Other major sources of objects were the collections of J. P. Morgan and Joseph Brummer...It contains medieval gardens and a series of chapels and themed galleries, including the Romanesque, Fuentidueña, Unicorn, Spanish and Gothic rooms.”

A collage of things once sacred and then bought and decontextualized, it's the very manifestation of the commodification of things once manifest of commitment and conviction but then repurposed as things of commerce and tourism, which (tourism) is more about acquiring experiences than about actual experience, actual occurrence and encounter. Wikipedia tells us of it all, “The design, layout, and ambiance of the building is intended to evoke a sense of medieval European monastic life.” But this begs the question: can you evoke the experience of monastic life? Isn't the experience of monastic life something that can only come with time, conviction, commitment, and intensity of place and relationship? How can you “evoke” that? The evocation of that gets manifest in monastic vows and a settling in, an unpacking of your bag and a putting on of your habit and staying with it for years, decades.

Short of that, it's something more akin to pretend—like when tourists stop into our meetinghouses to catch a glimpse of us at worship, something that's happened at both churches now. How quaint we are! Are we actors? Is this paid gig? It's just like Sturbridge Village!

Essentially, then, I think the Cloisters is a very classy version of Cinderella's Castle in the heart of Disneyland—which is intended to evoke the sense of being a princess living in a medieval castle.

I told you you'd hate me.

But, if you do, then it's likely because maybe I've demystified this otherwise wonderful place. And if I've done that, then it only proves my point, because kitsch depends upon mystification, even pretend. Kitsch depends on myth, and its own myth-making. Kitsch can't survive critique, depends upon pretense. As one critic put it, Harold Rosenberg, the antagonist of kitsch is reality.

But people fall for it. New Yorkers fall for it—and they’re supposed to be so sophisticated! And visitors to New York do as well. People make pilgrimages to the northern tip of Manhattan to experience the Cloisters—because it’s so peaceful, it’s so contemplative. On their lunch breaks, on their weekend picnics, they’ll pass churches by the tens, by the hundreds, on their way north. Trinity Church, Wall Street. Grace Church, Episcopal, Judson Memorial (UCC!), the Religious Society on Rutherford Place, or just your neighborhood sanctuary, or just your neighborhood park, of which there is probably one every few blocks: they’ll bypass them all to get to The Cloisters.

Because, see, these are too immediate. These are too real. And people need reality, but a few steps removed. People need encounter, just through a glass darkly, not actually face to face. People want beauty and serenity, but in a museum, where there’s distance that comes of pretention, not in a church, where something immediate and mysterious haunts and spooks—that unignorable silence mentioned in the poem we heard a couple weeks ago.

It’s always funny to me: The Cloisters of Fort Tryon Park: these are neither cloisters, nor are they situated in a fort (any actual fort about a mile south, which was so during the Revolutionary War), nor are they under the stewardship of anyone named Tryon (any actual Tryon being but the last British governor of the territory before ultimate British withdrawal and defeat, this named after him as a sort of consolation prize).

But I digress.

The essay that surprised me the most in my textbook reading of *Kitsch* was by Karl Pawak, a German editor of whom I’d never heard, of a prominent German art magazine, of which I’d never heard, and a communicant of the Catholic Church. Tackling the subject of Christian kitsch, writing in the late 60s, Pawak recognized that kitsch always manages to creep into sacred spaces, its architecture and furnishings and trappings. This, because part of the project of art and creativity is to reveal something new, to let loose some new insight or unmask some long-hidden truth. But often the Church is defensive against such new unveiling, seems more eager to present a truth that’s total, complete, not as continuing to be revealed. Really, the Church seems to have lost faith in the future as also held in the Holy Spirit. It seems to have lost faith in the on-going unveiling of God in our midst, and in the faithful imaginings of the people who gather as the Church—for, now, it seems Christian art must *not* reveal anything new, must simply reproduce what has already

been sensed as true and then deemed by ecclesiastical authority (or market forces) as true and so safe to communicate as true, which makes for really bad art—angel figurines in Hallmark stores, church-merch as my son calls it while he sells it at the Shrine of the Divine Mercy.

Yes, in many cases it makes for really bad art.

It makes for even worse theology.

And this, according to Pawak, is the real loss here—not the ugly styling found in so much “Christian figuring” but the loss of weight in theological imagining and conviction. “The weight of our current theological concepts is always decreasing,” he writes. “There has been an enormous loss of substance in Christianity...” he laments—this “substitution of something sweet and nice for something extremely powerful, [this substitution of something] secondary for what must be primary, [this propagating of mental] and moral Christianity [instead of] the objective, ontological Christ event.”

Here was my reaction upon reading of *Kitsch* on my Vermont vacation: “Oh, my God, he believes in the Church.” I was unnerved, to be frank, while reading this very heady, very mid-century, very European collection of academic and theoretical essays. I mean, I expected learned atheism and cultured despising. What I got was prophetic worry and an urgency among this faithful, not to mention a mirror cast back to me regarding my office art, and to avoid altogether my attitude about Communion, which he takes as a lot more substantive than I tend to. “He believes in the Church. He believes in the Church more than *I* believe in the Church.” I just hadn’t expected it.

“This theological loss of substance,” he insisted, “can be seen, for instance, in the mystery of the Communion, in the mystery of the bread and the wine, the body and blood of Christ. An ‘occurrence’ has quite clearly degraded into an ‘object.’”

This, I imagine he’d say, is emblematic of the more general degradation, or loss of weight, as regards “once ontologically significant elements that are now transformed into psychically moral ones.” The Church has become no longer the living body of Christ gathering in witness to the change in the world’s nature that came with the Christ event, has instead become a place where you go to learn how you should behave, to be instructed in what naughty things you should refrain from and what nice things you should embrace.

But this isn't about being nice. This isn't about being sweet and agreeable. This is about something far more urgent than that, far more substantive, weighty, significant, *crucial*, than that.

Time was I thought the most interesting part of Jesus' speaking here about the Church was the implication that we would *not* all simply get along. Really, his talk here seems to indicate that he knew we *wouldn't* all simply get along, that we would therefore need a method for reconciling when we *didn't* all simply get along.

This interested me because I had long believed that this was a person's highest aim. I had long thought that not getting along was a sign of something wrong, even terribly wrong. So, getting along was evidence of everything being right—that it was “meant to be” and all that. What it might be, though, is evidence of everyone keeping a safe distance from one another—because people get along best when we only barely interact.

But the Church isn't to be a place of keeping a safe distance from one another. It is to be a realm of loving one another.

There's nothing safe about that.

Jesus, then, isn't offering here a contingency plan just in case relationship meets with conflict, hurt feelings, call it sin. He's speaking reassurance that such things—conflict, hurt feeling, even sin—will indeed come into play, and that this isn't indication that something is wrong, that it's not “meant to be,” but rather that things have finally, at long last, gotten real. So, conflict, sin: here is not indication that “this isn't meant to be” but opportunity for evermore reality, ever-deepening relationship.

The details of Jesus' suggested method aren't necessarily “best practices.” They might even be, in some cases, bad practices. I mean, as Jesus imagined it, it would come down to the wronged party to initiate making things right. But it shouldn't always come down to the one violated to initiate reconciliation. Likewise, as Jesus encouraged it, the one violated is to approach the violator, and in private, which isn't always good or wise, might be in some cases a real danger. Finally, involving a wider group in the process of unmasking harmful behavior and a holding to account could unleash a dynamic of blame and retribution that compounds the problem rather than ameliorating it. In sum, working through the complications that come of the reality of sin is itself complicated. One thing's clear, though, from this passage: the Church will be, like all other endeavors in the world, touched by sin, vulnerable to sin. People will cause offense, and others will

take offense, and this all needs to be addressed while the offense is still small, lest it compound itself into resentment and retribution and intergenerational destruction.

Really, the Church is and shall ever be just as any human endeavor in the world.

And yet, it is also something transcendent as God's realm is transcendent, is mystical and timeless as God's realm is mystical and timeless—an entity of real and profound power, of true and immediate presence.

Do you believe that?

Do you?

Do I?

Having our services of worship outside this summer has been an utter surprise. This is what I hear from everyone, some even suggesting we do this every summer even when COVID is no longer the problem it now still is.

I think one reason for it being so surprisingly delightful is that worship this way frees from even what kitsch might have crept into our indoor services. Not that our sanctuary suffers from much kitsch. But, it always finds a way in, right? One thinker on the topic even insisted that sacred art of any sort is impossible now, has been for over a century, will be until the end of this age, that anything aiming for Christian art is but kitsch—the controlled reproduction of some already-approved religious sentiment.

It always finds its way in.

It has a harder time, though, finding its way out.

Here, outdoors, [which in Monterey is on Dick Tryon's farm, and so situated in true Tryon Park,] the totalizing force of kitsch doesn't stand a chance, not amidst the *mysterium tremendum* of nature and spirit. It just *feels* so real out here, which indicates to me that it is real.

And I know all the risk and ridiculousness to be found in supposing the Church really is all that powerful—is somehow true, is somehow effecting of the eternal and utterly real.

But I understand also the risk in surrendering such a claim, surrendering such an aim. Something is at stake here. The loss of connection to what is real, the loss of the conviction that there is any such thing as the real, the capitulation to mere repetition and mere reproduction, the surrender to what purports to be significant, but in all its plasticity bears no actual weight and no true glory: this is what's at stake.

For all this, I believe in the Church.

Who's with me?

Thanks be to God.