

Addition by Subtraction

Mathew 18:15-20

Rev. Curtis Bablitz

September 10th, 2023

I know that there are some people here who are fans of the Vancouver Canucks – I know this because during the search process, several people asked me which hockey team I cheered for, and made it clear that ‘The Toronto Maple Leafs’ was the wrong answer. I have cheered for the Canucks my entire life, and if I haven’t given up on them yet, I can’t imagine anything will push me over the edge. And like most hockey fans, I spent the summer wondering who my team would sign – clearly last year’s team wasn’t up to the task, and some changes had to be made, and so as soon as free agency opens up you eagerly wait to see what ridiculous sum of money is going to be thrown at which eventual disappointment, which players will be added to our roster to make it better.

But this summer, the biggest move the Canucks made wasn’t an addition, it was a subtraction. They signed a few new players, sure, but they showed some uncharacteristic restraint – nobody flashy, just some solid backup pieces. But their biggest and best move was subtraction, getting rid of a very, very expensive defenceman who had been a disaster every time he stepped on the ice last year – they just paid him a boatload of money to leave town and never come back, and it

immediately made the team better. This is known as addition by subtraction – when your best move isn't adding something new, it's getting rid of something that's been holding you back.

And addition by subtraction happens in more than just hockey. There are all sorts of things that clutter up our homes and make our lives more complicated, that we end up happier when they're gone – purging possessions that do not spark joy, sending it all to a garage sale or thrift store. Trading in that big empty house for a cozy apartment, selling the second car and buying an electric bicycle, sending your child off to college and then changing the locks so they can't get back in, sometimes life is simpler when we stop trying to make things work, and just get rid of the problem altogether. Sometimes, addition by subtraction is the best way to fix a problem that seems impossible to fix.

And sometimes, that's how we handle problems in the church. Because let's face it, every church has problems. Every church has relationships that break down, disagreements that turn into grudges, inadvertent slights and careless comments that fester beneath the surface for years until they burst out into the open one Sunday morning during the passing of the peace. And when we have problems in church, it is oh so tempting to deal with them through addition by

subtraction. We start thinking that the only way to fix our broken relationships is just to end them, for the offending person to be gradually ostracized from the wider community until they finally leave. Every time we have a theological disagreement over some seemingly trivial issue, there is always the temptation to just walk away, head down the block and start a new congregation where we will do things the right way – there's a reason that the history of the Church is littered with splits and schisms and the number of different denominations in the world is estimated at over thirty three thousand.

When the only way you know to fix a problem is just to cut that problem out of your life, when addition by subtraction is the only option, it's no surprise if you just keep subtracting and subtracting every person that's wounded you, every voice that disagrees with you, until there's nobody left in the church but you.

And that's not how Jesus wants the church to deal with our problems. Jesus knows we'll have problems, and in our gospel reading this morning, he tells us how we're supposed to handle those problems, and it's not by cutting people off, shrinking the circle of people we consider to be our family in Christ smaller and smaller and smaller. Instead, Jesus calls us to bring more people in. When you have a problem with another believer, go and talk to them about it. And if

that doesn't work, make your circle a little bigger – bring in a trusted friend, a third party who knows you both and the situation that's dividing you. And if that doesn't work, bring in the whole church, a whole chorus of voices and perspectives who can listen in love and help you work things out. Each time, Jesus calls the church to deal with the problem by expanding the circle, bringing people in instead of cutting people off.

And even at the very end, if the entire church agrees on a course of action except for one stubborn person who refuses, even that is not the end. Matthew's gospel tells us that in that case, you should treat that person as if they're a gentile or a tax collector, which sounds bad, sure, but you have to remember how Jesus treated gentiles and tax collectors – not with rejection, not with condemnation, but with grace and love, with always open arms ready to welcome the lost one home.

It's worth remembering that the church has always claimed that this gospel, Matthew's gospel, was written by a tax collector, someone who should have been irrevocably condemned and ostracized, except that Jesus welcomed him in and made him part of the church. Jesus' way of dealing with problems is messy – it means talking to the person who hurt you, one on one, it means

bringing in more voices and perspectives who might not see things the way you do, it requires humility, an acknowledgment that you might be wrong, and it requires grace, a path of redemption left open for even the most stubborn holdout. Addition by Subtraction will always be the easier path, just cutting someone out of your life as soon as they've wronged you, cutting yourself off from the rest of the church as soon as you disagree, but that's not the path Jesus calls us to take.

Even in our disagreements, even when we fight, we're still called to draw the circle of the church wider and wider, to include more and more voices, a diverse chorus of faithful followers of Jesus who in that diversity can help us understand the will of God for the whole body of Jesus Christ.

Because even though this is a hard path to walk, it isn't a path we are walking alone. The promise we have from our Saviour is that when we choose to bring people together instead of driving them apart, when we seek to hear the voices of the whole people of God in all their diversity and complexity, there among us, we will hear the voice of Jesus Christ. At every step along that difficult road, from the moment when the two people first sit down to talk to the moment when the whole church gathers together, at every step of that road, Jesus Christ

is there – because those two are gathered in the name of Jesus, Jesus promises to be there with them. When the church gathers in Christ's name to work out the things that divide us, we have God's promise that in the midst of all those different voices, the voice of Jesus Christ will speak, the power of the Holy Spirit will move, that the will of the Spirit can be discerned through the deliberations of God's people.

When we cut ourselves off from our fellow believers, when we withdraw and subtract and shrink the circle smaller and smaller, we are making it harder and harder for the voice of Christ to be heard, we are cutting ourselves off from the opportunity to hear the voice of Jesus Christ coming from our neighbour, from our fellow believer, even from the most unexpected places and people, from gentiles and tax collectors, from those who know firsthand how good the grace of Jesus Christ truly is.

The Christian life is not meant to be lived in isolation, it's meant to be lived in community, in a community that is drawn as wide as possible to include all the diversity of God's church, so that in all those different voices, God's harmony can be heard, as Jesus comes among those who gather in his name.

St Augustine once said that in Essentials, let there be unity – in everything else, let there be liberty – and in all things, let there be charity. When we work together as Christ's people, there will always be challenges, there will always be disagreements and divisions, but what is essential for us as Christ's people is the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, his grace and love at work here among us through the power of the Holy Spirit, his voice speaking to us when we gather in his name.

In those essentials, we stay united, and in all the rest, there will be difference and diversity, and that's okay, because it is in that diversity, when two or three gather in Christ's name, where Jesus will be revealed. And in all our disagreements, in all our diversity, we are always called to love, to love each other unconditionally as we have been loved by Christ, to keep working to extend the circle of Christ's love wider and wider, so the world will see God's love made real in the church, so the voice of Jesus Christ will be heard in all we say and do. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen!