

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 8, 2002

Christian Education Sunday

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

We Have a Special Guest at Bible Class

1. He doesn't mind small groups 2. He's right in the middle of things

"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:20)

While I was traveling a few weeks ago, I turned on the television in my motel room and "The Hour of Power" was on. Robert Schuller, the pastor at the Crystal Cathedral, was interviewing Maria Shriver, the network news reporter, who is a Kennedy clan and the wife of Arnold Schwarzenegger. I heard only a bit of the interview and then had to leave. Then, last Sunday, when we were in southern California, nearly the same thing happened. We were getting ready to leave for church and "The Hour of Power" was on and special guests were being interviewed. This time, a pastor filling in for Robert Schuller was interviewing two "little people," Nick and Lucy Delle Valla. Nick is walking across the country, presenting himself as Zacchaeus and using the journey as a way to share his faith with people. I began to suspect that special guests are a regular feature of "The Hour of Power." A check of "The Hour of Power" Web site verified this. It seems that nearly every Sunday service at the Crystal Cathedral features a special guest—somebody famous or at least somebody with an interesting or encouraging story to tell.

We don't have many special guests featured in our Sunday services here at St. Peter. For one thing, we don't have the budget to bring them in. What's more, I'm not sure they'd come here even if we paid their way. We're no Crystal Cathedral. We don't host thousands of worshipers on a Sunday morning, with hundreds of thousands more watching on television. Two hundred worshipers would be a triumph for us. But the last verse of today's Gospel lesson reminds us that we're not totally without special guests here at St. Peter. The truth is, we have a special guest who makes every special guest at the Crystal Cathedral pale by comparison. Jesus is our special guest, as he is the special guest in every place where two or three believers have gathered in his name. This morning, on our Christian Education

Sunday, I'd like to examine this promise of Jesus. And since it is Christian Education Sunday, I want to apply Jesus' promise especially to the subject of Bible class. What Jesus promises here leads us to say that **We Have a Special Guest at Bible Class** who doesn't mind small groups, and who's right in the middle of things.

1. He doesn't mind small groups

Here in Matthew 18 Jesus has been teaching about church discipline. In what he says here, Jesus implies that prayer will be an important tool for regaining the soul trapped in sin. He pledges, "**Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.**" Then he goes on to explain why he can make such an amazing promise. "*For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.*"

There are famous people who, for the right price, will come and speak to your group. Athletes, authors, business tycoons, even ex-presidents have signed up with speakers' bureaus. You can contact their agents and, if you've got the money, can sign a contract to have a famous person come and speak. Oh, and one other thing: Most of them will want a guaranteed audience of a certain size. After all, wouldn't it be embarrassing if a famous person traveled a great distance to deliver a speech and only a handful of people turned out to listen? So it's a bit surprising when Jesus declares that he doesn't mind small groups. "*For where two or three gather together in my name, there am I with them,*" he says. This doesn't at all mean that we can't count on Jesus to be present if we're praying or reading the Bible alone. But here Jesus promises his *special* presence when a group of believers gather in his name, even if that group is just 2 or 3 believers. Clearly, Jesus doesn't want us to attempt to live our Christian lives in isolation. He sees a special value when Christians gather in groups in his name, rather than going solo, even if the group is just two or three believers. He wants us to see the value, too. To that end, he vows, "When you gather, I'll be with you."

This isn't just any kind of gathering. Jesus says, "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." To gather in the name of Jesus means that Jesus is the reason for the assembly. It's a gathering that aims to address Jesus in prayer or to learn what he's revealed about himself in his Word or to carry out the work he's given us to do. This worship service is one of those gatherings. So were the elders' and school board meetings that we had yesterday. And in Bible class, in Sunday school, and in our family devotions at home, we also come together in Jesus' name. The fact is, Jesus will come and meet

us whenever and wherever we've gathered in his name. And by his presence, he'll bless us.

And our reaction is...? "Wow, I'm busy! I don't know if I can make it." "Sorry, we've made other plans." "Not this week." Even the most disciplined and eager Bible student among us has to acknowledge that there have been times when we behaved as if despising the opportunities to gather in the name of our Savior was just a minor sin, if it was even a sin. Like going 28 in a 25 m.p.h. zone. Would it shock you, though, if I told you that I don't know of a sin as deadly as despising the opportunities to gather in Jesus' name? Do you find that incredible? Deadlier than breaking up a family by committing adultery? Deadlier than a methamphetamine habit? Deadlier than filing a false corporate earnings report and overstating profits? Yes, deadlier than all that.

Martin Luther thought so. He once wrote, "If we must stumble or sin, may God rather let us sink into all sorts of folly, if only we do not lose this treasure, Christ in his Word...For this Treasure is the power that crushes the head of the devil, that is, destroys his kingdom and all its might." In another place he wrote, "I have lived to see the greatest plague, to wit, the contempt of the Word, the most extreme and godless misdeed of the world, upon which must follow as a punishment whatever is horrible in this world. If I wanted to curse someone badly, I would curse him with contempt of the Word of God. Then he would have everything that is bad at once, namely, internal, external, and eternal evil." [[What Luther Says, #4811](#) and [#4813](#)]

You may wonder where Luther got an idea like this. He got it from the Bible. St. Paul admonishes us in Ephesians 6 to put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, we will be able to stand our ground against the devil's schemes. To despise the Word is to enter this dangerous combat zone disarmed. It does more than give the devil a foothold—it leaves the door to our souls wide open for him. And as to a hierarchy of sins with the despising of the Word at the pinnacle as the worst of sins, listen to Jesus. He said it will be more bearable on Judgment Day for the residents of Tyre and Sidon (the ancient centers of the worship of the idol Baal) than it will be for the "godly" city of Capernaum. (Luke 10: 13-15) Why? Because the people of Capernaum would not welcome Jesus and those who came to them in his name.

This ought to hit us like a shot to the solar plexus. This is Jesus saying that when we were too busy for his Word, too preoccupied to go to his

house, it's as if he was holding out his hands to us and we stalked off in the other direction. Our preference for foolish and useless pursuits was an offense to the Savior who entered this fallen world to bleed and to die for us. Heedless of his sacrifice, heedless of our own spiritual needs, we declined the invitation to meet with our Savior. We don't deserve his blessings. We deserve a curse and a sentence to hell.

So where's our hope? It's in the Word, the same Word we sometimes treat so cavalierly. Here are words sweet to the ears of sinners. Here's what the Word says in Paul's letter to Titus. (It's Jesus speaking to us here.) **"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men." "...we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good." "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."** (Titus 2:13,14; 3:4-7) In Christ, all is forgiven. Promises like these make it sheer joy to read God's Word.

I'd like to go back for just a little while to Jesus' promise, *"...there am I with them."* You've probably heard of little children who, when told they're going to God's house, expect to see God. And when they see the pastor in his robe, some children have said, "Look, there's God!" Soon they learn it's not God they're seeing, only the pastor. And, somehow, the explanation, "God is here; you just can't see him," doesn't sound as exciting as actually being able to lay eyes on God—and not just for small children, but for older people, too. It seems to me that if there's one thing that could account for our lack of enthusiasm for the study of God's Word, it's that we've lost our belief that Jesus is really present where his name is being called on or proclaimed. I have to believe that if we knew that Jesus was going to be visibly present in our worship or Bible classes or Sunday school, we'd spare no effort to be present there. But even if Jesus isn't visibly present, he does promise that he's right in the middle of things when we come together in his name.

2. He's right in the middle of things

The phrase, *"there am I with them,"* is literally, "there am I in the middle of them." Jesus isn't like some shy newcomer who hugs the edges of the room. He's right there in the middle of things. But what do we mean by that? It's not his omnipresence, by which after his resurrection he is present everywhere in the universe at one time. It's not a localized presence, so that he's here in Modesto with us, but not up in Lodi or over in Livermore. It is instead a special, supernatural presence by which Christ in both his divine and human nature is present with his Church as our Mediator, our Head, our King, and our High Priest. He intercedes for us. He leads us and rules us. And through his Word, he speaks to us.

I admit, this is not what greets our eyes. What you see here instead is a pastor, who—far from being a special guest, is a well-known quantity whose weaknesses and cadences you've gotten to know all too well. The carpet beneath your feet may be worn or stained. The temperature in the room may not be what you call comfortable. In fact, there may be a whole host of factors telling you, "There's nothing special going on here." Yet, when God's Word is being proclaimed, what you hear is God's Word, the very voice of your Savior. He's here, here to bless, to admonish and to forgive, to comfort, strengthen, and in every way assist us.

You've noticed those church ads in the newspaper. A guest preacher is coming. A singing group from out of town will be on hand, they tell us. I assume that the purpose of those ads is to get people to come who otherwise might not come. If everyone came every time there was worship, there'd be no sense paying the money for the ad. But really, we could say every week that a special guest is going to be present at our worship, at even our humblest Bible study gatherings. That special guest is Jesus. I pray that his promise will move each of us to order our lives in a way that will let the Word of our Savior can dwell in us richly. Amen.