

Christ Is Among Us

Scripture: Matthew 18:15-20

September 6, 2026 - Week 1 of Sermon Series: "Alive Together"

Theme: *"I AM PRESENT." - My presence matters.*

Key Sentence: *My presence matters because Christ is present when his people gather.*

Grace and peace to you in the name of God our Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, today we begin a new sermon series for the month of September called "Alive Together: Showing Up for Christ and for One Another." During these four Sundays, we will walk together through four simple declarations: I am present. I am growing. I am influencing. I am participating.

Each week builds upon the one before it. Before I can grow with you, I have to be present. Before my life can positively influence you, I have to be present. Before I can participate in ministry with you, I have to be present. So today we begin with the first and perhaps most basic declaration: "I AM PRESENT."

Let me ask you a simple question. Have you ever wondered, "Does it really matter whether I am there?" Maybe you have thought about Sunday worship, a Bible study, a church meeting, or a fellowship gathering. You might say, "There will be plenty of other people there. They do not really need me. Nobody will notice whether I come or not."

Perhaps we sometimes think that way about church. Worship will happen whether I am there or not. The pastor will still preach. The musicians will still play. The prayers will still be prayed. So does my presence really matter?

Jesus gives us a powerful answer in Matthew 18. He says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Many of us know this verse well. But the larger context is important. Jesus is talking about relationships within the community of faith. He is talking about what happens when someone sins against another person. He is talking about conversation, listening, accountability, reconciliation, prayer, and learning how to remain together even when relationships are difficult.

Then Jesus gives this promise: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Jesus is saying something profound about the church. We are not merely people occupying the same room. We are people gathered around the living presence of Jesus Christ.

So today I would like us to reflect on four movements:

First, Christ Is Present When We Gather

Second, My Presence Matters to Other People

Third, My Absence Also Affects the Body

Fourth, We Show Up Because Christ Showed Up for Us

The key sentence for today is this:

"My presence matters because Christ is present when his people gather."

First, Christ Is Present When We Gather

Why do we come to church? Why get out of bed on Sunday morning? Why drive here? Why gather in a sanctuary? Why sing together, pray together, hear Scripture together, and share the sacraments together?

We do not come merely because Sunday worship is a tradition. We do not come simply because the pastor prepared a sermon. We do not come only because we enjoy the music or because our friends are here. We gather because Jesus Christ has promised to be present among his people.

Jesus says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Notice what Jesus does not say. He does not say, "Where two or three perfect Christians gather." He does not say, "Where two or three people agree about everything." He does not say, "Where two or three people have no problems." He simply says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

That is good news, because churches are made up of imperfect people. Sometimes we disagree. Sometimes we misunderstand one another. Sometimes we disappoint one another. Sometimes we come carrying joy; sometimes we come carrying grief. Sometimes we come strong in faith, and sometimes we come barely holding onto faith. But Jesus says, "I am there."

Church, we should never underestimate what happens when God's people gather. Christ may speak to you through Scripture. Christ may touch your heart through a hymn. Christ may meet you at the Lord's Table. Christ may answer your prayer through another person's kindness. Christ may strengthen you through someone's handshake, or use a conversation after worship that neither person had planned.

"We do not simply attend a service; we gather with the Body of Christ, and Christ is among us."

That changes the way we think about Sunday. The church is not primarily a building. The church is a people gathered around Jesus Christ. This building is important, our traditions are important, and our ministries are important. But Christ is the One who makes us the church. And because Christ is present, our presence matters too.

Second, My Presence Matters to Other People

Sometimes we underestimate the ministry of simply showing up. We often think ministry is what happens from the front of the sanctuary. The pastor preaches. The liturgist reads Scripture. The musician plays. The choir sings. The elder leads. The deacon serves. Those are important ministries, but some of the most powerful ministry in a church happens without a microphone.

It happens when someone walks through the door and says, "Good morning. I am glad to see you." It happens when someone notices that another person is sitting alone and goes to sit beside them. It happens when someone remembers, "You told me last week that you had a doctor's appointment. How did it go?" It happens when somebody says, "I heard about what happened. I have been praying for you."

It happens when someone notices a visitor and makes room for them. It happens when a child sees an older Christian faithfully worshipping week after week. It happens when someone struggling with faith hears the congregation singing around them.

Sometimes another person cannot sing, but we sing for them. Sometimes another person cannot find the words to pray, but we pray with them. Sometimes another person's faith is weak, and for a season they lean upon the faith of the community around them. That is church.

Think about a grieving person. When someone loses a husband, wife, parent, child, or friend, we often struggle to know what to say. We think, "I need to find the right words." But sometimes there are no right words. Sometimes the most powerful gift is simply: "I am here." I do not know exactly what to say, but I am here. I cannot take away your pain, but I am here. I cannot fix everything, but I will sit beside you.

"Presence itself can become ministry."

The same thing happens every Sunday. When you show up, your presence quietly says to another believer, "You are not walking this journey alone." You may never know who needed to see you that Sunday. You may never know who noticed you. You may never know who received encouragement simply because you were there. But God knows.

"When I show up for Christ, I am also showing up for someone Christ loves."

That is why today we declare: "I AM PRESENT." My presence matters.

Third, My Absence Also Affects the Body

Now we come to the third truth, and this is an important one. If our presence can strengthen the Body of Christ, then our repeated absence can also affect the Body of Christ. I want to speak about this carefully and pastorally.

There are many legitimate reasons someone may not be able to worship with us. People become sick. People travel. People work on Sundays. People care for family members. Some are homebound. Some desperately wish they could be physically present but cannot. So this is not about guilt. It is about recognizing that we belong to one another.

The Apostle Paul describes the church as one body with many members. Every member is connected. Every member contributes. Imagine your physical body. Suppose your hand said, "I think I will stop participating for a while." Or your eye said, "The rest of the body will manage without me." Or your foot said, "Nobody will really notice whether I contribute." The body might continue functioning, but the body would feel the absence.

The same is true in the church. When someone is missing, worship may still happen. The sermon may still be preached. The songs may still be sung. The offering may still be received. But something is missing, because someone whom God has joined to this body is not there.

And this becomes especially important for those who are leaders: pastors, elders, deacons, teachers, committee leaders, musicians, parents, grandparents, and longtime members. When leaders are faithfully present, they communicate something without saying a word.

"Worship matters. The church matters. These people matter. Serving Christ matters. Being together matters."

But the opposite can also happen. When church leaders repeatedly treat worship as optional, other members may begin to think, "Maybe worship really is not that important." When mature Christians rarely participate, newer Christians may think, "Perhaps participation really does not matter." When parents say faith is important but consistently place everything else ahead of worship, children notice.

When those who hold leadership positions are absent from the life of the church, the congregation notices too. We influence others not only by what we say. We influence others by what we consistently show is important.

And church, I am not preaching this only to you. I must preach it first to myself. As your pastor, my presence matters too. I cannot say, "Please make worship important," if worship is not important to me. I cannot tell you, "Be present for one another," if I am unwilling to be present with you. I cannot ask elders and deacons to serve faithfully while I treat my own responsibilities casually. Christian leadership begins with example.

Our congregation is watching all of us. Our children are watching. Our youth are watching. Newcomers are watching. The community is watching. And our lives are answering the question, "How important are Jesus Christ and his church to us?" Sometimes we answer that question without saying a single word.

"What does my pattern of presence communicate to the people around me?"

Because our presence can encourage participation, and unfortunately our absence can sometimes normalize disengagement. That is why every member matters. If you are an elder, your presence matters. If you are a deacon, your presence matters. If you are a musician, your presence matters. If you have been here fifty years, your presence matters. If this is your first month here, your presence matters. If you are young, your presence matters. If you are older, your presence matters. If you believe you have nothing special to offer, your presence still matters.

The Body of Christ is stronger when its members show up for one another.

Fourth, We Show Up Because Christ Showed Up for Us

But the sermon cannot end with, "Everybody needs to attend church more." That is not the gospel. The deepest reason we show up for one another is this: we show up because Christ showed up for us.

Christian faith begins not with our presence before God, but with God's presence with us. The Gospel of John says, "The Word became flesh and lived among us." God did not love humanity from a distance. God came near.

Jesus entered people's homes. Jesus sat at tables. Jesus walked dusty roads with ordinary people. Jesus welcomed children. Jesus touched people others avoided. Jesus stopped for people everyone else walked past. Jesus stood beside grieving families. Jesus ate with sinners. Jesus walked with confused disciples. Jesus wept with those who wept. Jesus listened. Jesus touched. Jesus stayed.

And ultimately Jesus went all the way to the cross for us. Jesus did not save us from a distance. Jesus came among us. Emmanuel: God with us.

"Jesus did not save us from a distance. He came among us. And now he calls us to show up for one another."

Because Christ came near to me, I will come near to others. Because Christ did not abandon me, I will not easily abandon others. Because Christ listened to me, I will listen. Because Christ forgave me, I will seek reconciliation. Because Christ walked with me, I will walk beside someone else.

That brings us back to Matthew 18. The passage is really about what happens when relationships become difficult. Jesus does not tell us simply to walk away. He teaches us to go to one another. Talk. Listen. Seek reconciliation. Bring others into the process when needed. Pray. And through all of it Jesus promises, "I am there among you."

Christ is not present only when everything is easy. Christ is present when we are learning to forgive. Christ is present when we are repairing relationships. Christ is present when we are struggling to understand one

another. Christ is present when we are praying together. Christ is present when two or three gather in his name.

So our presence with one another becomes a reflection of his presence with us.

A Word for This Particular Sunday

Today carries another special meaning for us. Later this afternoon, we will gather for my pastoral installation. But an installation is not simply about installing one pastor. It is about recognizing a ministry that we share together.

A pastor cannot be the church. A Session cannot be the church. A choir cannot be the church. A committee cannot be the church. We are the church together. My calling is to show up for you faithfully as your pastor, and your calling is to show up faithfully for Christ and for one another.

So perhaps this first sermon of September is especially appropriate for us. We begin this new chapter not merely by saying, "Pastor Paul is here." We begin by saying together, "We are here." And more importantly: "Christ is here among us."

Conclusion - I Am Present

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this is where our September journey begins. Today: I AM PRESENT. Next week: I AM GROWING. Then: I AM INFLUENCING. And finally: I AM PARTICIPATING.

But we cannot skip the first one. Before I can grow together with you, I must be present. Before I can encourage you, I must be present. Before I can influence you, I must be present. Before I can serve beside you, I must be present. Before I can truly know your joys and struggles, I must be present.

So perhaps God is asking each of us a simple question today: Where is God calling me to be more present? More present with God? More present in worship? More present with my family? More present with another church member? More present with someone who is grieving? More present with our children and youth? More present in ministry? More present in our community?

Perhaps we cannot solve everyone's problems. Perhaps we do not always know what to say. Perhaps we do not have every gift. But there is one thing every one of us can offer. We can say, "I am here." And sometimes those may be among the most powerful words another person hears.

"When I show up for Christ, I am also showing up for someone Christ loves."

Today, on this first Sunday of September, we declare together: "I AM PRESENT." My presence matters. Not because the pastor is counting people. Not because we are trying to improve statistics. Not because God loves us more when our attendance is perfect. But because we belong to one another. Because we are members of one body. Because our presence strengthens others. Because our absence affects others. And above all, because Christ is present among us.

So let us show up. Let us worship together. Let us pray together. Let us listen together. Let us forgive one another. Let us encourage one another. Let us carry one another's burdens. Let us be present.

For Jesus has promised: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Church, CHRIST IS AMONG US. And therefore we can say: I AM PRESENT. And together, we are the Body of Christ - ALIVE TOGETHER.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Congregational Response

Pastor: Church, why has God gathered us?

People: I AM PRESENT. MY PRESENCE MATTERS.

Pastor: When we gather in Christ's name-

People: CHRIST IS AMONG US!

Pastor: And together we are-

All: THE BODY OF CHRIST - ALIVE TOGETHER!

Reference Notes

1. The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; John 1:14.
2. R. T. France, The Gospel of Matthew, New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007, commentary on Matthew 18.
3. Craig S. Keener, A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999, commentary on Matthew 18.
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together. New York: Harper & Row, 1954, reflections on Christian community and shared life.