

Daphne C. Cody
St. Elisabeth, Glencoe
September 7, 2008

Where's the power?

Exodus 12:1-14; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

The Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the Olympics this past month in Beijing were spectacular. Tens of thousands of spectators gathered in that magnificent Bird's Nest Olympic Stadium, cheering and singing. Entertainers did amazing feats as the country in which fireworks were invented showed off the wonder of pyrotechnics. The hundreds of athletes marched in and gathered. The people in the stands were given light-sticks which had a stunning effect even on a small TV screen on the other side of the world. I felt a sympathetic rush at the Closing Ceremonies when I saw the three humble African marathoners get their medals on the podium amidst the stunning crowd.

Enormous gatherings of people do give you a rush. Part of the whole deal with going to a football game or a rock concert, after all, is the thrill of the crowd.

Massive papal masses do that too. Coronations of monarchs. Political

conventions during presidential election years. New Trier High School graduations. You name it. Half the thrill is the buzz of the crowd.

Jesus would not have ever experienced tens of thousands – there was no Roman coliseum in Palestine and the Temple wasn't *that* big, -- but Jesus did know crowds. The Bible tells us that several times Jesus addressed crowds of four and five thousand. And those crowds certainly were inspiring! And certainly there was a thrill there on the Mount, there by the sea.

But Jesus talks about something different today. He talks about two people. Or three people. Just a few. Truly I tell you, Jesus said, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. Where two or three are gathered in my Name, there I am in the midst of them. Tens of thousands may seem to be where the power is, but truly, Jesus tells us, the real

power is in the two or three who agree on earth, the two or three who gather in God's name.

In a giant stadium or auditorium, all that is asked of those gathered is that you behave minimally civilly and that you respect other people's personal space by staying in your ticketed seat. Agreement is as minimal as "Go Bears!" or "Go McCain!" or "Go Obama!" or "We love world-class athletic events!" or "We love Jesus!" or what-have-you.

Is it inspiring? Yes! Does it help build a great feeling of camaraderie? Yes!

Does it help you solidify your identity? Yes!

But does it change anything? Does it help ease the lives of the poor and downtrodden? Does it create a better world? Does it teach love? Not quite as clear a Yes. Probably a No.

There's nothing wrong with gathering in giant crowds, it's fun and positive most of the time, but actually discovering ways to create a better world, actually doing something to serve the poor in the world, and the true learning of respect and love, these occur in small groups of persons coming together to do the hard work of relationships and in relationships.

Two or three here, two or three or six or ten there doing the hard work of finding agreement on what the problems are and then doing the even harder work of finding solutions. Two or three here, two or three or six or ten there working diligently to learn together how love works, to learn how power works. Two or three here and two or three there doing the hard work of listening to one another to find deep understanding of how other people see things, and then loving them anyway – in those tiny relationships, in those tiny units, among the smallest units of society, that's where the world shifts, that's where the power is to bind and to loose, to transform lives and to recognize the presence of Christ.

I have recently joined an online networking website called Facebook. I have my own page with a picture of me and with a few salient facts about me that I'm willing to post on the Internet. And I have about forty friends on Facebook – my Facebook page links up with their Facebook pages. It's fun – and I find myself keeping in touch online with some friends from childhood, friends from college, seminary, and other places. Beau is one of my Facebook friends, so is my daughter's classroom teacher. Many of my friends join "causes" on Facebook. All you have to do is click a box or two, and it pops up on your Facebook page that you have "joined" that cause. One of my Facebook friends joined the cause "Cure Breast Cancer" for example. But there's also "Mosquito Nets for Jesus" and "Adoption's an Option" and countless other causes that show the online world what you believe in.

Facebook also tells you how many adherents any particular cause has, sometimes numbering into the hundreds and thousands. But the whole thing is

sort of like being in the Bird's Nest in Beijing. You may join "Adoption's an Option" on Facebook, but you don't have to DO anything. The five thousand people who have "joined," for instance "the Vicar of Dibley Appreciation Society" have done it for a laugh; there is nothing required of them. Nothing in the world will change by this form of joining. If you're not on Facebook, but you have email, you will recognize this same phenomenon in the zapping around of forwarded emails of jokes and causes and wicked clips of celebrities and politicians. This is all fun, it helps solidify your identity, it helps you find like-minded people, but it requires nothing of us in our primary job as Christians: to bind and to loose, to transform the world to a better place, to love others as Christ loves us.

That only happens in the deep hard work of finding agreement in prayer with two or three or six or ten.

Jesus said, "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." Can that be for real?

Does Jesus really mean that if Carol Harper and I sit down and pray for something – anything at all – God will just go “poof” and grant our wish like a genie? Well, maybe.

But the truth in the “truly, truly I tell you” goes more like this: when the world or the church needs transformed, when our society is corrupt, or our neighbors are starving, or our urban teenagers are dying in gang violence, or our teachers are underpaid, or our mentally ill people are homeless, or there are adults who can’t read, we need to do the hard work of putting our hard heads together and agreeing on what it is we imagine God wants, and what it is that God is asking us to do. Having two people agree on the deep things that really matter is a lot easier said than done. Jesus is describing how the power of God works, how the kingdom of God works, how it is that things are energized to really happen.

Jesus said, “When two of you agree on earth about anything...” like Michael Madigan and Rod Blagojevich doing more than hugging for example. Or the

bishops of the Anglican Communion doing the hard work of really figuring out the way forward in practical terms, or two parents figuring out the best way to set limits on their child's behavior, or school leaders figuring out how best to educate the kids in their school, or an executive board making a decision about how to raise the bottom line in an ethical way, when we look at matters like this – then we begin to understand that God is no genie, that the hard work starts with us.

It's a common feeling that I alone am too small to be able to accomplish anything in this world. I read about the world's ills and it makes my heart ache. I assume I am not alone in that feeling. It's all so overwhelming, and how can I, as one person, do anything to change anything? And that's right. Giant stadiums of people cheering and booing don't change anything either. The wisdom of Jesus is clear. It's in twos and in threes, in sixes and in tens, gathering in relationship, open to the spirit, working on building love and a future. That's where God is, that's where God acts, that's where the world is transformed.