

Sermon, September 6, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome back our good friends Debi and Sean Beachy for special music. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases and deaths are up again in Maryland; and many, if not most of our members are either in high-risk groups, or they spend time with friends and family members who are.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you have friends or family members who do not have internet service, you can easily record this service on your laptop and sit down and share it with them. Even if they don't care for the service, I bet they would like seeing you. Meanwhile, if you would like to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com (no spaces or caps)
Now today's stupid joke.

I read where a Coast Guard patrol last week rescued a lone sailor who had been shipwrecked and stranded on an uncharted Pacific island for fifteen years. The crew said there were three elaborate buildings on the island, and they asked the castaway about them. "This first one," he said, "I built as my house. I live there. The second one I built as my church. I worship God there." They asked about the third building, and he said, "Oh, that one used to be my church, but I'll never set foot in that place again." Hold that thought...

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray.

O Lord God, enliven and preserve your church with your perpetual mercy. Without your help, we mortals will fail. Remove far from us everything that is harmful, and lead us toward all that gives life and salvation, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

A reading from Ezekiel, the thirty-third chapter.

So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" Say to them, As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the eighteenth chapter.

[Jesus said to the disciples] "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. 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.

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. 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. 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

The Gospel of the Lord

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen

Conflict in the Church is even older than that joke I just told about it. In fact it has apparently been around as long as the church itself. The undisputed letters of Paul pre-date the gospels by decades, and conflicts and divisions in the various churches to whom Paul wrote is a major concern of those letters. Congregational struggles are common throughout the Book of Acts as well, and they continue to this day, especially now with the covid19 pandemic putting so much pressure on churches and their leadership.

Today's reading is part of the fourth of Jesus' five great speeches in Matthew. It is commonly called, "The Discourse on" or, "Instructions for" the Church. Perhaps more accurately we should call it,

“Instructions for the church in trouble.” And frankly, when it comes to Church trouble, I’d rather talk about pretty much anything else. But ignoring congregational conflict was clearly NOT among Jesus’ instructions for the Church. So okay—here goes.

First of all, scholars suspect these were actually the words of Matthew’s author rather than Jesus.

They say having Jesus say anything about the Church would be anachronistic, since there really WAS no church until after the resurrection. But I still think Jesus had a pretty good understanding of human nature and probably COULD have foreseen all the messiness ahead for his church, or for that matter ANY institution run by and for, human beings.

So when he pledged to be present when and where his followers gather, I wouldn’t be surprised if Jesus was really thinking, “Where two or three gather in MY name—Duck and cover. Because it is only a matter of time before all heck breaks loose.”

In the years I have spent as a worship leader and then seminary student, trauma center chaplain, intern and parish pastor, congregational divisions happened in all three synods where I served. In our time, there have been plenty of church dust-ups in this county, this town, and even this building.

Who knows-- if Paul were alive today he might have penned a special epistle or two just for the Oaklandians. And I guess we shouldn’t be surprised, because there wouldn’t be Lutherans or any other brand of Protestant if Martin Luther hadn’t started a MAJOR spat in the Catholic Church five hundred three years ago next month.

Meanwhile the so-called Great Schism that divided Catholics from the Orthodox is closing-in on its thousandth birthday. Those who study congregational dynamics suggest that if your church HASN’T had a

major dispute or division in the last twenty years or so—LOOK OUT!
You are overdue.

Even the peace-loving Brethren and Amish sects were born out of conflict, which led them to break away from the Mennonites, who along with the Hutterites had previously left the ironically-named Brethren in Christ. And so it goes.

These days new start-ups pop-up almost every week, as one after another disgruntled group breaks away to start its own church. Paul famously likened the Church to one body with many members. Well, today that One Body is made up of more than forty-one thousand different associations, confederations, denominations—aka-- body parts; many of whom won't even talk to each other. There are forty different species of Lutherans in North America alone. Makes you wonder whatever happened to that ONE Church—with a capital "C" that we SAY we believe-in every time we recite the Apostles' Creed.

I am a certified Intentional Interim Minister. And much of my two years of classroom and fieldwork preparation for that involved studying congregations in conflict. Sometimes their difficulties stem from differences in theology or doctrine or worship practices. Or maybe (God forbid) they chose a new hymnal. Or changed the carpet. Or painted the church parlor a different color. Because mostly congregational conflicts turn out to be matters of internal politics, personality clashes, and especially issues of power and influence.

Every congregation I know has at least one member whose sole purpose in church seems to be to complain and criticize. And those folks tend to move around a lot, so often times they end up on the problem child list of several congregations at once. The most publicized church divisions lately have been over "us vs. them" issues. Some folks apparently think that, "Just because Jesus welcomed everyone doesn't mean WE have to." (Sorry to disagree. But yeah, I think it kind of does!)

Sometimes folks in leadership roles decide to step down, saying, “I have done more than enough. It’s someone else’s turn.” But then they decide they don’t like the way that someone else does things.

Piecing divided congregations back together can be a daunting task. That’s part of what Intentional Interim Ministers are supposed to do. So thank you Matthew for at least trying to help. But I’m not so sure today’s “Instructions for the Church” really do. By the way, they may sound familiar. They appear verbatim in the model constitution for congregations of the ELCA.

In fact, the parts about first going to troublemakers alone, and then taking one or two with you as witnesses, and then dragging them before the assembly, etc. appear in our constitution and bylaws in section C15.01--a section entitled “Discipline of Members and Adjudication.”
Adjudication? Discipline?

That makes the church sound like a court of law. Or maybe the principal’s office. Sorry, but I doubt that’s what Jesus had in mind for his church.

The pillars of our faith after all, are love, compassion and forgiveness. That’s how God treats us and expects us to treat each other. So you would think conflict and division in a church would be easy to resolve. Problem is, the words “Love,” “Compassion” and “Forgiveness” never appear in today’s reading of Jesus’ instructions for the church. And the words that DO appear don’t always make much sense.

First of all, if the other church member’s sin against you happens to be something like domestic violence, then the first step should NEVER be to challenge the offender alone. Those situations demand intervention, not confrontation.

And frankly, I can't imagine it ever appropriate for me, the pastor, to haul a disgruntled St. Mark's member before the congregation for a hearing, as bylaws C15.02 through .05 requires.

I heard your former Bishop tried to do something like that many years ago when THIS congregation was in a crisis of sorts. Well, how did that work out? Thought so.

Some biblical scholars say we don't get the whole picture in these "instructions for the church" because today's reading ended two verses too soon. They point out that in the next verses Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive a church member who sins against him. And then suggests, "Seven?" And Jesus says, "No. Try seventy-seven."

They say his point for communities, families and especially faith families is that conflicts only heal when people forgive each other.

But then I noticed the Greek word translated as "forgive" in those verses wasn't $\chi \alpha \rho \iota \zeta \omicron \mu \alpha \iota$, like you would expect.

$\chi \alpha \rho \iota \zeta \omicron \mu \alpha \iota$ means "to pardon unconditionally, or show grace or favor toward."

Instead the word translated as "forgive" in this case is

$\alpha \nu \theta \eta \rho \omega$. Which instead means to send off. Reject. To let go of. To leave behind. Or even Divorce.

So Jesus was NOT saying when trouble rears its ugly head in the church, "pardon unconditionally." He was instead saying when someone in the church sins against you, try your best to put it behind you. Let it go. Get over it. And do so for your own peace of mind and well-being, not so much theirs. But even that's not easy.

Especially since 95 percent of pastors polled in a recent survey by Christianity Today's Leadership Journal said they have experienced at least one very painful congregational conflict in their careers. Twenty percent reported it was ongoing at the time of the survey.

Which showed 38% of pastors leave when they get drawn into congregational disputes. And it's not uncommon for 38 percent of the members to leave as well.

Meanwhile, during the current pandemic, I recently read where one Baptist minister said that a group of parishioners threatened to quit giving if he didn't open the church back up for regular worship soon. And an even larger group said they would stop giving if he did. Well, there you go.

I remember when I was in college my church was in some sort of turmoil. I don't remember why. Might have been carpeting. The pastor confided in me that he was considering leaving to accept a call to a large congregation in New York. He said he explained to his teenage daughter that God may be calling them to a different place. And his daughter said, 'That's okay, Dad. God always gives us a bigger house, a nicer car and gives me a larger allowance when he moves us.'

And that's about all I plan to say today about church conflict. When this text shows up again in our lectionary a few years from now, I'm calling-in sick. Or maybe by then, we can actually take vacations again.

In the end, I believe it is God who created us as a richly diverse group of human beings. Who come in many different colors, shapes and sizes; political slants, lifestyles and orientations. Some think exactly the way we do. But many do not. Still, through grace, God has granted us faith and called us together as a community. We may expect different things from our lives and from our church and from its leaders. But we are all God's children, so there really is no us or them.

We'll have disagreements at times, But Jesus says we can get past those,
so let's try. If I offend you, please try to forgive me.
Or better yet, just get over it, and I will try to do the same with you. I
think he'd want it that way.

Of course if you decide I should leave, just let me know. I'll go quietly.
But please give God a little lead time. To come up with a little more
allowance...a nicer car... and a bigger house.

Amen.
