

September 27, 2009
First Evangelical Lutheran Church
Idaho Falls, Idaho

17th Sunday after Pentecost

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29 Psalm 19:7-14 James 5:13-20 Mark 9:38-50

Dear Followers of Jesus Christ, Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from his Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's now been about 5 weeks since our Churchwide Assembly where some big decisions were made. I preached the Sunday after those decisions were made and shared with you some of the thoughts of ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson at that time. He described three different groups of people, all with different reactions to what had happened at the Churchwide Assembly.

Using his descriptions, I would like to name those three groups once again today. A first group, in reaction to the votes on ministry policy, Bishop Hanson described as "a group of people who had just experienced loss, or perhaps were wondering if they still belonged, or in fact felt deeply that ones to whom they belong had been severed from them." This is the group that was not in favor of the ministry policy decisions. A second group "wondered if they belonged, and suddenly now had received a clear affirmation that they belonged. All of the wondering about the dividing walls and feelings of separation seem to have dropped away." This is the group that was in favor of the ministry policy decisions. A third group "had neither experienced loss nor the feeling of a dividing wall of separation coming down, but were worried whether all that had occurred might sever the unity that is ours in Christ."

In the five weeks that have passed since Bishop Hanson first described those three groups, it is clear that all three of those groups exist here in our congregation. As your associate pastor, I have become increasingly concerned about the conversation between all three groups. My concern is that we not get to the point where we decide to cut off conversation with one another. So, my sermon today is an attempt to bring some healing and some peace, and I want to do that by first naming some things that I think all three groups have in common.

All three groups are experiencing a certain amount of pain. Because of their position in favor of the ministry policy decisions, there are people who feel scared to speak up and do not feel welcomed, and that brings pain. Others, because they were not in favor of the ministry policy decisions, feel like they are viewed as people who do not love their neighbor, and that brings pain. And still others, and this probably includes each and every one of us, are in pain because of the fear of division in the congregation and the fear of people that we love leaving the congregation. We are all experiencing a certain amount of pain.

A second thing I think we all have in common is that we all desire to be faithful followers of our Lord, Jesus Christ. That's what brought us together in the first place, and that's what keeps bringing us back together. We have gathered together to receive what our Lord wants to give to us in a very special way in worship. Where or when else during the week will we come to a baptismal fount, dip our fingers in the bowl, trace the sign of the cross on ourselves, and remind ourselves of our most basic identity, that of a beloved child of God? Where or when else during the week will we come to our Lord's Table, hold out our hands, and receive the body and blood of Christ, assuring us of his

love and his presence in our life? We desire to be faithful followers, faithful disciples of Jesus, and we gather every week to receive what he would give us for our daily life.

A third thing I think all three groups have in common is that we love our congregation. You have invested your time, your talent, and your treasure to the ministries of this congregation. You have spent energy, wiped away sweat, and have shed tears down through the years. This congregation is an important part of the story of your life, the story of the life of your family, the story of the life of this community. All of us have a deep love of this congregation.

One more thing I think all three groups have in common is that we need each other. We are all the body of Christ, and we need each other, as the Apostle Paul wrote in 1st Corinthians: “Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the foot, ‘I have no need of you.’” Through Christ, we are made members of the body of Christ, and we need each other.

No matter which of the three groups you find yourself in, reminding us of what we have in common is an attempt on my part to bring some healing and peace. Ultimately, though, I am not the one who can bring that healing and peace. It is only God who can bring us healing and peace. And I think this is where the reading we heard from James this morning is so very helpful to us. It talks about the healing and peace that come about when we pray with and for one another:

“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of

the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

So, to close this sermon, I want to invite you to a time of prayer, where we pray with and for one another. I will begin with an opening prayer to God and then invite you to pray with and for one another in some moments of silence.

I invite you to bow your heads as we humbly pray now before God. Let us pray:

Into your hands, almighty God, we place ourselves: our minds to know you, our hearts to love you, our wills to serve you, for we are yours.

Into your hands, incarnate Savior, we place ourselves: receive us and draw us after you, that we may follow your steps; abide in us and enliven us by the power of your indwelling.

Into your hands, O hovering Spirit, we place ourselves; take us and fashion us after your image; let your comfort strengthen, your grace renew, and your fire cleanse us, soul and body, in life and in death, in this world of shadows and in your changeless world of eternal life.

Having placed ourselves once again into your hands, we humbly pray to you and share with you the pain and anxiety in our life, and we humbly ask for your healing and your peace.

In a moment of silence, we pray now with and for one another. We pray for those who have experienced gain through the decisions of our Churchwide Assembly, but who

have felt scared to speak and who have felt unwelcomed due to their views. Loving God, bring healing and peace to our congregation.

In a moment of silence, we pray with and for one another. We pray for those who have experienced loss through the decisions of our Churchwide Assembly, and who have felt like they are now viewed as people who do not love their neighbor due to their views. Loving God, bring healing and peace to our congregation.

In a moment of silence, we pray with and for one another. We pray for those who have experienced neither gain nor loss through the decisions of our Churchwide Assembly, but who are living in the fear of division in our congregation and the fear of loved ones leaving the congregation. Loving God, bring healing and peace to our congregation.

O Lord, graciously hear us as we seek after you. Calm our bodies and minds with your peace which passes all understanding. Direct us, Lord God, in all our doings with your most gracious favor, and extend to us your continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in you, we may glorify your holy name. O God, we bring these intercessions before you, knowing that you will hear us as you have promised, and will answer according to the mercy shown to us in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.