

“In it Together, Like it or Not”

1 Corinthians 3:3-9

Matthew 5:21-28

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1 Corinthians 3:3–9

As long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.

Matthew 5:21–28

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

Today, I want to talk about church. Not just church in theory, not just organized religion in general, but this church – *our* church. Today I want to make the case for staying together as a congregation, even in the midst of

extraordinary difficulty and painful disagreement. (Nothing like getting straight to it on my first Sunday back in the pulpit! Then again, what have I got to lose? But I promise: this isn't going to be the theme till I've finished in April!)

Now, for those of you who are new here or just visiting, I apologize if you feel like you've wandered into a heated conversation at the family dinner table! I pray that what I'm saying helps you in your own spiritual discernment, helps you in your journey of faith.

I want to start by naming the elephant in the room. We are in one hot mess as a church. From my vantage point – and I must name that mine is only one vantage point; none of us can see the whole picture! – from my vantage point, we find ourselves in the wake of a perfect storm.

- First, there was the decision of a beloved older couple in the church to continue to love their friend, as he lived in his shame of being on the sex offender list. They came to me early in my ministry seeking a place for him to belong.
- Then there was my decision to try to find a safe and welcoming place here for his redemption. I sought the wisdom of others, but at the end I was ill-advised – and I take full responsibility.
- Fast forward to last fall, and the decision of some preschool parents who discovered this man was here – some of whom went to the police, which they had every right to do. Instantly, it became a civic matter instead of exclusively a church matter.
- Next came my decision to go on leave, to provide space for the Session – our board – to conduct an investigation. They rightly took their fiduciary responsibility seriously. They also took their spiritual responsibility seriously, which wasn't an easy tightrope to walk.

- Finally there came my decision, after prayerful discernment, to leave my pastorate here. Session didn't ask for it; I offered it, and after weeks of discernment, they decided to accept it. Last week, you, the congregation, decided to concur as well.

So here we are. I sincerely believe that each step of the way, everyone tried to do their very best as decisions were made. But that hardly means that things are “settled.” Indeed, they are far from settled, and you, this congregation that I love, are even more unsettled than when I first came – which is really saying something!

Some of you are angry at me – angry at the choices I made, and resentful that I'm still here at all; and others of you are angry at me for leaving. And some of you are defending me, or wanting me to change my mind.

Some of you are angry at Session and Personnel Committee for taking so long, or going fiduciary, or not communicating more, or letting me go. And others of you are dearly grateful for the hard, hard work they've done, the painful work of taking on the burden of accountability.

Some of you are mad at the particular Preschool parents who set out to protect their kids, and some of you are mad at the Preschool as a whole. And others of you are longing for the Preschool to be fully embraced by our church, for there are so many wonderful families in it.

Some of you are angry at the man whose presence in the church got this whole ball rolling. And others of you are angry that he's not allowed to be here – especially those of you in the choir or in Rummage, who know him and love him.

Some of you are angry at this whole mess, that's inserted itself right when our country is splintering politically, or maybe your family has come apart, or your health is a train wreck, or your job is at risk. And some of you –

some of you aren't angry at all; you're just plain tired, tired of this tangled web, and wishing we could get on with being church again.

I'm sure I've left some of you out ... but you get the picture.

So why bother? Why bother with church? Why not be done with organized religion, as one of you so poignantly said at last week's congregational meeting? Why not at least be done with *this* church, this messy, shaken, complicated, painful place? Please allow me to make the case for staying ... not just for putting up with each other, but for using even this time to shine the light of Christ into the world that God so loves.

You might ask why I even think this is *possible*. I want to remind you that we are not the first to be here. Having written the history of our congregation, I can attest to the fact that we have been torn by conflict before. One of my favorite stories dates back to the earliest days of our congregation, as we were constructing the first sanctuary on this very site. It was during the Civil War, at a time when our country was even more torn apart than it is now, and we were sending our own sons off to war. And in the midst of that, members of our congregation were split apart as well ... split apart *over the color of the carpet in the sanctuary*. At least we're not arguing over that!

Since then we've endured many more fights: arguments over pastors, battles over worship styles, divisions about politics, strife over social issues. How many of you have been here over 50 years? 25 years? 10 years? 5 years? 5 days? You know what I'm saying.

But church fights ... church fights go much, much farther back than our congregation's 156 year history. In fact, *church fights have always been a part of being church*. It goes with the territory – with this difficult work of trying to follow Christ together. That comes through loud and clear in the first Scripture lesson that we heard today – the passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. This letter was likely written around 50 AD – less than 20 years after Christ's death and resurrection. The Corinthians were clearly a divided

lot: “there is jealousy and quarreling among you,” Paul says to them. Earlier in the letter – just after the opening pleasantries – Paul says:

“I appeal to you ... by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ ... that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me ... that there are quarrels among you Each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor. 1:10-13).

And – forgive me – but I cannot help but translate Paul’s words into our own time. Some of you say, “I belong to the Preschool,” or “I belong to Rummage,” or “I belong in Chris’s camp,” or “I belong to Session.” It is as if Christ has been divided, and, like Paul, it pains me that it is so.

But pretending it’s not so is foolish. Instead, like the Corinthian community, what we’re called to do is find our way through our pain and dissension by following Christ. Which leads me to our other Scripture passage from this morning: the words of Jesus himself in the gospel according to Matthew. Jesus has just finished telling his followers to be salt of the earth and the light of the world – not for the sake of their personal righteousness (the way the Pharisees do it!), but for the sake of the world God loves. Then he tells us what that kind of faithfulness looks like:

“You have heard that it said, ‘You shall not murder’ ... But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable ... and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable ... and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you

will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

Whoa. I am *for sure* headed to the hell of fire for every time I’ve said to a driver in front of me, “you idiot”!

Just what is Jesus saying? First, notice that he’s predicting that we *will* get angry with each other. We *will* call each other fools and idiots – even on our way in to church, even as we’re putting our offering in the plate. Jesus isn’t stupid; he knows us better than we know ourselves.

And Jesus also knows that others in the church *will* be angry with us! They will resist our opinions, despise our decisions, denounce our authority – whether or not we deserve it. It goes with being church.

But notice what he tells us to do: when someone else is angry *at us*, we are to stop what we’re doing and go be reconciled with our accuser. It doesn’t matter whether we’re right, or whether we’re wrong. We are to seek reconciliation with them. I especially love his last line: “You will never get out until you have paid the last penny.” If we want to seek our own self-vindication, that’s fine – have at it.

But what a waste that would be. You see, we’ve already been justified, the price of our sin has already been paid, the time of our judgment has already been served – not by us, not by anything we’ve done, not by any virtue we’ve performed or decision we’ve made. We’ve been set free once and for all by the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Lord.

That’s why, in the end, it will not matter whether or not I am here as your pastor. Sooner or later, all pastors come and go. Just as Paul once planted and Apollos watered, so it is with us – with James G. K. McClure, and Herb Anderson, and Terry Swicegood ... with John Bellingham and Henry Warkentin ... with Corey Nelson, and now with Amy, and with me. Some of you have told me, lovingly, that you’re here because of me – and I have such

mixed feelings when you say that. Don't get me wrong! I am grateful beyond measure that I've had an impact on your faith. But in the end, it isn't my presence that matters. In the end, it is only the love of God in Jesus Christ that matters. And that – that love will never, ever go away.

The church has never been an easy place to be. Not in the early days of this congregation. Not in the days of Paul. Not in the days of Jesus himself. It shouldn't surprise us – we are still human, after all. We're not fully mature yet; we still see as in a mirror, dimly; we still know only in part.

But it's precisely in these times of dissent and disagreement, these times of anger and distress, when our faith matters most of all. It's precisely now, in these times when the world looks at us, and wonders what to make of us, that our behavior with each other matters most. It is precisely now, in these times when the culture around us will gossip, and we wonder where the person in the pew behind us stands, that our testimony matters. Because belonging to Christ – belonging together – is the only way we'll be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

There is important work for us to do here, and important work to do beyond these walls, in the halls of government and in the streets of Chicago, in the boardroom and in the schoolroom, in our homes and in the hospital and in the silence of our hearts. Christ needs us. Christ needs us to be his people, right now. Christ needs us to be his people, together. It's the only way we can be the salt of the earth and the light to the world, which God so lovingly, desperately wants us to be. Now ... perhaps now more than ever.