

**Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost A  
Incarnation Lutheran Church**

**DISCIPLINE, RESTORATION OR BUILDING**

**GIVEN THE TEXTS BEFORE US THIS MORNING, I'LL BE HONEST WITH YOU. I'D RATHER SOMEONE ELSE HAD THE TASK OF PREACHING TODAY. THESE ARE HARD, TOUGH WORDS OF SCRIPTURE TO HEAR, TO INTERPRET - LET ALONE, TO PREACH. IN THE OLD TESTAMENT READING, GOD SPEAKS TO EZEKIEL. "I HAVE MADE YOU A SENTINAL - A WATCHDOG - FOR THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL. IF YOU DON'T CALL THE WICKED AMONG THEM TO TASK, I WILL HOLD YOU RESPONSIBLE AND YOU WILL DIE. IF YOU CALL THEM TO TASK AND THEY DO NOT LISTEN I WILL HOLD THEM RESPONSIBLE AND THEY WILL DIE." IN ROMANS WE HEAR: "ALL THE COMMANDMENTS ARE SUMMED UP IN ONE WORD - LOVE - LOVE EVERYONE - AND THAT INCLUDES THOSE YOU DON'T WANT TO LOVE - LOVE EVERYONE AS YOU LOVE YOURSELF. AND THEN, OF COURSE, STRONGEST OF ALL - THESE WORDS OF JESUS IN THE GOSPEL READING FROM MATTHEW. "IF SOMEONE OFFENDS YOU, CONFRONT THEM. IF THAT DOESN'T WORK, TRY AN INTERVENTION. IF THAT FAILS, CUT THEM OFF AND KICK THEM OUT." STRONG, HARSH - DISTURBING EVEN -WORDS! BUT THESE ARE THE ASSIGNED TEXTS FOR THIS DAY FROM WHICH I AM TO PREACH!**

**REINHOLD NEIBUHR, AN EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY RENOWNED THEOLOGIAN AND SEMINARY PROFESSOR, IS OFTEN QUOTED AS SAYING, "THE TASK OF PREACHING IS TO COMFORT THE AFFLICTED AND AFFLICT THE COMFORTABLE." ANOTHER CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGIAN PUTS IT THIS WAY: "PROCLAMATION (PREACHING) IS A HOLY, WONDERFUL AND DANGEROUS THING. TO PROCLAIM GOD'S JUDGMENT WITHOUT GOD'S PROMISE IS CRUEL, DANGEROUS, AND UNSCRIPTURAL. TO PROCLAIM GOD'S PROMISE WITHOUT GOD'S JUDGEMENT IS ALSO CRUEL, DANGEROUS AND UNSCRIPTURAL. GOD'S JUDGMENT AND GOD'S PROMISE ARE TOGETHER GOD'S WORD TO US AND THE WORLD."**

**SO, SEE WHAT I MEAN? I'D REALLY RATHER NOT BE PREACHING THIS MORNING, BUT I AM. AND I CONFESS, THIS WAS NOT AN EASY SERMON TO WRITE – NOR DO I THINK IT WILL BE AN EASY SERMON FOR YOU TO HEAR – BUT HERE WE ARE. SO, LET'S TAKE A LOOK, WITH A PARTICULAR FOCUS ON JESUS' WORDS TO HIS DISCIPLES FOUND IN OUR GOSPEL TEXT FROM MATTHEW.**

**JESUS LAYS OUT A FOUR-STEP PROCESS THAT, FOR MANY DOWN THROUGH THE AGES, HAS SERVED AS A GUIDE FOR DISCIPLINE IN THE CHURCH. CONFRONT, INTERVENE, KICK OUT. MOST THEOLOGIAN**

**TODAY WOULD CALL THAT INTERPRETATION MISGUIDED AT BEST....NEITHER HUMANE NOR BIBLICAL AT WORST. ON THE SURFACE JESUS SEEMS TO SAY TO THE ONE MEMBER OF THE CHURCH HARMED BY ANOTHER MEMBER OF THE CHURCH, YOU GO CONFRONT THEM. IF THEY WONT LISTEN, TAKE A FEW OTHER MEMBERS WITH YOU AND TRY AGAIN. IF THAT DOESN'T WORK, TELL THE WHOLE CONGREGATION. AND IF THAT DOESN'T WORK, EXCOMMUNICATE THEM. NOW, WHILE THERE IS A PLACE FOR CHURCH DISCIPLINE, THIS SURFACE INTERPETATION IS NOT WHAT JESUS MEANT NOR IS IT THE PATH TO FOLLOW. THE PITFALLS ARE TOO MANY - BLAMING, JUDGING, CONDEMNING, SHUNNING - ALL LEADING TO SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS - NOT THE WAY THE CHURCH IS CALLED TO BE THE BODY OF CHRIST ON THIS EARTH.**

**A MORE COMMON INTERPRETATION AND APPLICATION OF THESE WORDS OF JESUS FALLS UNDER THE CATEGORY OF RESTORATION, WHICH SEEMS MORE HUMANE, MORE PRACTICAL AND MORE BIBLICAL. CONGREGATIONS ARE MADE UP PEOPLE AND PEOPLE - WELL, PEOPLE ARE PEOPLE. WE SAY THINGS WE DON'T MEAN - OR MAYBE WE DO! WE GET UPSET WHEN WE DON'T GET OUR WAY - WHEN WE FEEL LIKE WE HAVENT BEEN HEARD - AND SO SOMETIMES**

**WE TRY THE TACTIC OF DIVIDE AND CONQUER. OR WE CLOSE OUR EARS AND REFUSE TO LISTEN TO ANY OTHER OPINION BUT OUR OWN. WE DIG IN OUR HEELS, REFUSE TO BUDGE AND THEREBY MAKE LIFE MISERABLE FOR OTHERS. WE GET MAD AND JUST GO AWAY. AND JESUS IS SAYING THERE'S A BETTER WAY. HIS WORDS ACKNOWLEDGE THAT CONFLICT HAPPENS AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE. HIS WORDS ACKNOWLEDGE THAT IN THE CHURCH, IN CONGREGATIONS, GOD'S PEOPLE DO HURT ONE ANOTHER. BUT HIS WORDS INSTRUCT HIS FOLLOWERS TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY WHEN THESE THINGS HAPPEN, TO SEEK RESTORATION - TO SEEK THE HEALING OF RELATIONSHIPS. AND WITH A FEW CAVEATS, THESE WORDS OF JESUS CAN AND DO LEAD TO RESTORATION. FOR EXAMPLE, NEVER SHOULD WE FOLLOW A RIGID, LEGALISTIC APPROACH TO CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH. TOO OFTEN, AS I'VE ALREADY SAID, THAT LEADS TO POINTING THE FINGER AT THE OTHER - AND NOT AT OURSELVES - WHICH IS WHERE WE SHOULD BE LOOKING AND SECONDLY, NEVER SHOULD WE ENCOURAGE A VICTIM OF ABUSE TO CONFRONT HER ABUSER. THAT SIMPLY INTENSIFIES THE ABUSE. AND JESUS NEVER INTENDED FOR HIS WORDS TO BE USED THAT WAY. HE MEANT THEM FOR THE HEALING**

**OF RELATIONSHIPS AND WHEN OBEYED RIGHTFULLY AND FAITHFULLY, IT WORKS!**

**IN A PREVIOUS CONGREGATION I SERVED, A MEMBER CAME TO ME COMPLAINING ABOUT THE WAY HE WAS BEING IGNORED BY OTHER MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION – AND ONE, IN PARTICULAR. HE FELT NO ONE CARED WHETHER HE WAS A MEMBER OF THAT CONGREGATION OR NOT. HE WAS READY TO LEAVE. WE TALKED ABOUT HIS WILLINGNESS TO SHARE THAT WITH THIS OTHER PERSON. AND HE DID. AT FIRST, THE OTHER PERSON DENIED HIS ACTIONS, BUT THEN AS MORE AND MORE EXAMPLES WERE SHARED, HE SAW WHAT HE WAS DOING. HE ASKED FOR FORGIVENESS, PROMISED TO CHANGE HIS BEHAVIOR –AND NOT ONLY THAT, HE ASKED THIS MEMBER HOW HE MIGHT HELP HIM BECOME AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE CONGRGATION. THEY TALKED. THEY MADE PLANS. THEIR RELATIONSHIP WAS RESTORED AND ONE WHO DIDN'T FEEL HE BELONGED LEARNED THAT NOW HE DID.**

**WELL, BY NOW, I'M GUESSING THESE WORDS HAVE BROUGHT COMFORT TO THE UNCOMFORTABLE AND UNCOMFORTABLENESS TO THE COMFORTABLE ONES. THEY SURELY HAVE PUT BEFORE US BOTH**

**JUDGMENT AND PROMISE. BUT THERE'S STILL ANOTHER WAY, AN EVEN BETTER WAY, TO HEAR WHAT JESUS IS SAYING.**

**IN HIS BLOG TO PREACHERS THIS WEEK, DAVID LOSE, MY FAVORITE CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGIAN, SUGGESTS THAT PERHAPS MATTHEW ISN'T SIMPLY SETTING UP RULES FOR CHURCH DISCIPLINE OR FOR JUST RESTORATION. WHAT IF, DR. LOSE ASKS, THESE ARE NOT -MORE SO - WAYS TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN AN AUTHENTIC, GENUINE, LOVING COMMUNITY OF FAITH? MATTHEW'S GOSPEL, YOU SEE, WAS WRITTEN IN THE MID-EIGHTIES (THAT'S NOT THE 1980s - BUT FIRST CENTURY 80s) IN THE TIME WHEN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES WERE FIRST FORMING - AND THERE WAS MUCH CONFLICT. WHO BELONGS? WHO DOESN'T? WHAT DO JEWS DO WITH GENTILES? WHAT DO GENTILES DO WITH JEWS? WHAT ARE THE RULES FOR BELONGING? HOW DO WE FORM AN AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF FAITH?**

**WELL, DR. LOSE SUGGESTS THAT WE MUST LOOK AT THE WHOLE OF CHAPTER 18 IF WE REALLY WANT TO GRASP THE MEANING OF THESE SPECIFIC WORDS OF JESUS. IN MATTHEW, CHAPTER 18 COMES AFTER THE TRANSFIGURATION - AFTER JESUS' EXPERIENCE ON THE MOUNTAINTOP WITH MOSES AND ELIJAH AND GOD'S IDENTIFICATION OF HIM AS GOD'S BELOVED SON. JESUS CAME DOWN THAT MOUNTAIN**

**THAT DAY WITH EYES AND HEART SET ON JERUSALEM AND THE CROSS. THE DISCIPLES ARE FOLLOWING ALONG, QUESTIONING AND LEARNING ALL THE TIME ABOUT WHAT ALL THIS MEANS. CHAPTER 18 BEGINS WITH THEIR QUESTION ABOUT WHO IS GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD. AND JESUS SHOWS THEM A CHILD – THE GREAT ONES IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD ARE CHILD-LIKE – NOT CHILDISH, MIND YOU, BUT CHILD-LIKE. THEN COMES THE STORY OF THE LOST SHEEP – AND THE FOOLISH SHEPHERD WHO WILL LEAVE 99 AND GO AFTER THE ONE. AND FOLLOWING THESE VERSES FOR TODAY, A TEXT WE WILL HEAR NEXT WEEK, WE HEAR JESUS’ ANSWER TO PETER’S QUESTION: “LORD, IF ANOTHER MEMBER OF THE CHURCH SINS AGAINST ME, HOW OFTEN SHOULD I FORGIVE? AS MANY AS SEVEN TIMES?” AND JESUS SAYS, “NOT 7, BUT 70.” MORE ABOUT THAT NEXT SUNDAY!**

**AND SO WHEN WE HEAR THESE WORDS OF TODAY IN THAT CONTEXT – THE CONTEXT OF CHILD-LIKE TRUST, FOOLISH SEARCHING AND UNENDING FORGIVENESS, WE HEAR A TEACHING THAT REMINDS US THAT, AS DR. LOSE SAYS, “HERE’S HOW TO CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE CHRIST’S PRESENCE CONTINUES TO BRING FORGIVENESS, HEALING, AND JOY. WE DO SPEAK ABOUT ISSUES AND CONCERNS. WE DO LISTEN – EVEN WHEN LISTENING BECOMES**

**DIFFICULT. WE DO SEEK COMMON GROUND – A SOLUTION THAT SERVES THE GREATER GOOD AND REFLECTS CHRIST’S LOVE – NOT OUR OWN INDIVIDUAL WANTS. AND OH, DR. LOSE GOES ON TO REMIND US ABOUT JESUS’ COMMENT “IF THEY DON’T LISTEN, LET THEM BE TO YOU AS A GENTILE AND A TAX COLLECTOR “ REMEMBER, DR. LOSE SAYS, THOSE ARE THE VERY PEOPLE JESUS ATE WITH, SPENT TIME WITH – AND INCLUDED IN HIS MISSION AS THE MESSIAH OF GOD. SO JESUS IS SAYING, DON’T GIVE UP ON ANYONE. HANG IN THERE WITH THEM TO THE END.**

**AND SO, COME THE HARD QUESTIONS. HOW DOES THIS CALL TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN AN AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY SPEAK TO US RIGHT HERE AT INCARNATION? HOW ARE WE DOING? WHERE HAVE WE FAILED? WHERE ARE OUR GROWING EDGES? HOW DO WE LET GO OF PAST HURTS? HOW DO WE MAKE AMENDS WHERE AMENDS NEED TO BE MADE? HOW DO WE BURY THE PAST AND MOVE INTO GOD’S FUTURE TOGETHER? HOW DO WE REJOICE AND CELEBRATE THE GIFTS OF GOD TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD AMONG US? HOW DO WE “OWE NO ONE ANYTHING, EXCEPT TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER? AND HOW DO WE MAKE THAT LOVE, CHRIST’S LOVE, THE FOUNDATION OF ALL WE DO?**



**THESE ARE QUESTIONS WE AS A CONGREGATION WILL BE STRUGGLING WITH AS WE CONTINUE OUR PARADIGM SHIFT FROM STAFF-LED MINISTRY TO A DISCIPLESHIP MODEL. MINISTRY TEAMS ARE IN PLACE, FAITH FORMATION OPPORTUNITES ABOUND, OUR MUSIC PROGRAM HAS BROADENED TO INCLUDE CHILDREN AND YOUTH, COOKING TEAMS ARE SERVING DELICIOUS MEALS ON WEDNESDAY NIGHTS, AND PEOPLE ARE STEPPING FORWARD TO VOLUNTEER EVERY TIME A NEED IS IDENTIFIED - AND NOW TOGETHER WE ARE CALLED TO STRIVE EVEN MORE FAITHFULLY TO BECOME THE AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY GOD IS CALLING US TO BE. LOVING, NOT JUDGING.... INCLUSIVE, NOT EXCLUSIVE...RESOLVING ISSUES, NOT CREATING THEM...HEALING RELATIONSHIPS, NOT DESTROYING THEM... BUILDING BRIDGES, NOT FENCES. REMEMBER OUR PRAYER FOR THIS INTERIM TIME TOGETHER? IT'S ON THE BACK OF YOUR BULLETIN. PRAY THIS PRAY WITH ME NOW.**

**O GOD, YOU HAVE CALLED YOUR SERVANTS TO VENTURES OF WHICH WE CANNOT SEE THE ENDING, BY PATHS AS YET UNTRODDEN, THROUGH PERILS UNKNOWN. GIVE US FAITH TO GO OUT WITH GOOD COURAGE, NOT KNOWING WHERE WE GO, BUT ONLY THAT YOUR HAND**

**IS LEADING US AND YOUR LOVE SUPPORTING US; THROUGH JESUS  
CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN.**