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September 30, 2018

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
19th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Mark 9:38-50

From Psalm 19: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

From the time of Moses to the time of the early church even up to today, the people of God have struggled with division. The divisions we see in our nation and around the world can easily seep into the community of God's people, we who confess Jesus as Messiah, our Lord and Savior.

In Jesus' day there were different expressions of Judaism and there was suspicion between Jewish Christians and Gentile believers. During the time of the Reformation, even though Martin Luther's intention was to bring renewal to the Church of Rome, when it became clear that that could not happen the Protestant revolution opened the gate to the development of many Christian denominations.

Even within our own Lutheran expression there are more than 15 Lutheran denominations just in the United States today.

We heard in our first reading about how God told Moses to choose seventy elders to become additional faith leaders among the Israelites. But when two others who were not included in the cloud of God's presence began to prophesy, to speak on behalf of God to the people, they were scolded by those chosen leaders for going rogue. Moses, like Jesus in our gospel reading, welcomed any believer to proclaim the good news of God to the people.

Humans rely on official titles and proper processes. That's why only ordained pastors or Lay Pastoral Associates who are given permission by the bishop can preside over Holy Communion. Good order is important, but any believer can serve as a minister of Christ and sometimes we need to get out of the way of order to receive the good news from whomever God has blessed in that moment.

The church and we who live and serve in congregations can sometimes get in the way of that message. When, in the gospel text, Jesus goes on to talk about the cutting off of body parts, we need to read that in light of the previous paragraph. Jesus is calling the church to build up the faith of believers, to build up the Body of Christ.

When I was a kid we used a phrase to tell someone off when we were mad at them. "Cut it out!" It meant, of course that we wanted someone to stop what they were doing. When my brothers teased me, I would say, "Cut it out!" When a kid at the bus stop was pushing another kid around we would say, "Cut it out!" When I put up an attitude about doing my chores or practicing the piano, in moments of exasperation my mother might even have said, "Cut it out!"

In all these instances we didn't mean, cut off your tongue when you tease your sister or cut off your hand when you get too aggressive, or cut out your eye when you roll them at your

mother for holding you to your responsibilities. We wanted the behavior to be cut. But even more we wanted the evil or disrespectful intentions to be cut out. Just a few weeks ago we heard Jesus say in Mark chapter 7, “For it is from within that evil intentions come.”

As people of God who profess Jesus as Messiah and Savior, our responsibility is to build up faith, to cast out the demons that bind people, to lift up the weak in faith, and to be as united in that effort as we can be.

So when in our life together as the church our actions lead to division and jealousy and self-righteousness, Jesus says to us, “Cut it out!” Cut out whatever leads to the breaking down of another person’s faith. Cut off the jealousies, the striving to be right while putting down others who disagree.

Cut out the blaming and distrust that divide the people of God and put off the little ones among us. We do not all have the same level of maturity in our lives of faith and it is up to each of us to be sensitive and instructive in ways that build up the body of Christ.

How many of us know people who used to be members of this or another congregation and no longer attend? Have you ever asked them why?

Some of our deepest hurts come from people within the church. We expect everyone to be nice, but sometimes Christians are not nice to one another. We expect the church to welcome us when we return from a time away, but instead we are sometimes received with teasing rather than rejoicing that we have made our way home.

We expect a lot of things from the church and from one another, and because we are human beings, sinners one and all, we will not live up to those expectations all the time. Even I—especially I, as your pastor—do not and will not live up to your expectations all the time.

The divisions that can happen within the life of a congregation, and between congregations and denominations in the larger church, are evidence of the sin that pulls us away from God. Here Jesus reminds us that we are to be salt for one another—to enhance the faith of our sisters and brothers in Christ. We are to be peace makers, to find ways to acknowledge our differing opinions and practices and still remain united in the life and love of Jesus.

Wouldn’t it be amazing if the Church—all denominations—could find ways to express that peaceful presence with one another in order to shine the light of Christ to the larger society?

That is our calling, like those first Israelites, to be a light to all nations. And that calling begins here in the life of congregations like ours. Here we are called to be present with one another in ways that lift up, build up, support and encourage one another in our lives of faith—SO THAT each of us can serve the world with the light and life of Christ in our daily lives.

In this community we see cooperation among the Christian churches regularly. The Lewistown Christmas Cantata choir, the boards of the Salvation Army and Clearinghouse Connections, the many, many volunteers who serve at Council on Aging and the Community Cupboard and so many more local services are all made up of members from various congregations.

Soon Zion will be a part of the newly forming Love INC organization. Love In the Name of Christ will serve as a central service organization for as many of the churches in town as possible. The idea is to connect people with congregations who can minister both to the physical needs of people as well as their spiritual longings.

And here at Zion, we are being intentional about forming relationships within our family that will provide that cup of cold water Jesus talked about. Stephen Ministers walk alongside those having a difficult time. Confirmation Companions are learning and growing with our Jr High youth as they explore and claim the faith of their baptisms.

But I also know the value of the spontaneous encounters we have with one another. The conversations before and after worship, the committee meetings and Bible studies where food and fellowship are shared, monthly breakfasts, and even running into one another in the grocery store or at football games are all ways that God might call us to speak a word of hope or encouragement or bring peace with one another.

The divisions of the world are overwhelming right now. As followers of Jesus, let us deny ourselves by cutting out the ways we participate in bringing about division, especially in the life of the Church. Let us instead take up Christ's calling to be peacemakers and builders of faith for one another so that the light and love of Jesus is the word we shine into a world longing to receive him.

Thanks be to God! Amen