

Sermon For Sunday, January 22, 2017 - "Fierce Love"

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 22, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Fierce Love

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

This week I got to thinking that the author of our second reading today, the Apostle Paul, sounds a lot like I do at the end of multiple "no school due to ice" days. When Paul says, "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, be in agreement, let there be no divisions among you," I hear, "Please be kind. Please everyone, stop arguing! Why can't we all just get along?" Paul is making a much more complicated theological appeal than all that in his letter to a newly forming church at Corinth; but sometimes he sounds like a babysitter. Sometimes it feels like he's just offering clichés like "if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all"; "don't rock the boat"; "go along to get along" - clichés that encourage us to just make nice.

People often think churches should follow these clichés - that everyone should be nice and friendly and not disagree to make sure that everything stays positive and upbeat. Paul's words, "be of the same mind and of the same purpose", can make us think we're all supposed to get in line and conform to the dominant opinion. When there is conflict in churches, it is often interpreted to mean that we're just a bunch of hypocrites who aren't living what we believe.

From what I can tell, Good Shepherd has never much subscribed to these clichés. People here speak their minds freely and unabashedly and I'm so grateful. I grew up arguing faith and politics at the supper table, so I feel right at home here. But what do we make of Paul's guidance to the Corinthians in a letter that the church has claimed as important for Christians throughout the ages? As a congregation, are we supposed to have differences of opinion? Are we supposed to disagree and argue, or should we always be of the same mind and of the same purpose? What does that mean and how would we do that?

Does this scripture have anything to say to us in our lives out in the world? How do we live in a diverse country and among people who have a wide range of perspectives and views? Should we just try to avoid conflict, or are we supposed to be working to convince others of the truth of our perspective? Does this text mean Christians should all get in line behind an official point of view and work to get everyone else in line with it, too? Paul actually has something more powerful to offer us. When Paul says be of the same mind and the same purpose, he isn't advocating uniformity. Later in his letters to the Corinthians he affirms the diversity within their community. Paul also isn't advocating that we just conform to the dominant view of the community and try to get others to do the same. He was critical of leaders who were trying to get others to conform to their own agendas. And Paul certainly isn't advocating niceness. There are lots of ways you could

describe the Apostle Paul - nice isn't one of them.

Instead, Paul is encouraging his readers, his first readers and now us, to find unity in remembering that we belong to Christ and that we are baptized into Christ. We belong to Christ - Christ who showed fierce, strong love; Christ who challenged leaders who were not living out God's justice and mercy; Christ who also let go of power and control, humbled himself and loved to the end, even to the point of death. Belonging to Christ has nothing to do with niceness or groupthink. Belonging to Christ is about death and resurrection. It is about dying to our own egos and our desires to be in control or to be liked - dying to all that and rising each new day to new life in Christ, life in which we live as the body of Christ and as part of Christ's work of loving and healing the world.

This pattern of dying and rising begins in baptism. As Paul reminds us, we are baptized into Christ Jesus. In baptism we are made part of Christ's body and united to Christ's death and resurrection. And each new day, we are called to die to sin and rise to new life by remembering that we have been baptized into Christ, that we belong to the fierce, loving Christ.

Dying and rising also happens to us in the midst of a congregation that has a variety of different opinions and perspectives. As we live in community and come up against people who drive us crazy, people who think we're wrong, and people who won't back down, we are also confronted with our own sin and brokenness. When this happens, rather than trying to avoid all the mess or trying to get other people to get in line, we are called to let go of our own egos and remember that we belong to Christ. We all are part of the body of Christ; we all are part of Christ's fierce, loving work. We all have different roles in that work, we all have different functions and jobs to do as part of that body; but we have a common purpose - to love and heal the world.

In baptism, in daily dying and rising, in community, we are shaped into people who have the mind of Christ and a shared purpose. With this mind and this purpose, we can engage with each other in all our diversity, in all our disagreements, in all our joys and sorrow. We can practice kindness and forgiveness. With this mind and purpose, we can engage all the diversity of our world with a fierce love - a love that listens deeply and isn't afraid to let go of our opinions, to change our minds; a love that challenges injustice and engages even when it is hard; a love that is lived out as an engaged citizen and community member.

We belong to Christ. This gives our lives so much purpose - purpose beyond our own agendas and opinions, a purpose formed by the one who gave himself to the whole world in love. This purpose, this life, is what Jesus called his first disciples into. It is what he calls us into each new day.

Let's take a moment to pray.

Amen.