

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy loving God, today we come to your house and name what is good and is of you. The beauty of each day, the flowers, the sunshine, the time we spend together in laughter and joy, the time we spend together holding one another in our distress. What is good is not always easy, but it ultimately fills our souls. Behind all of these things is you, loving God. You are the source of all that is good, all that fills us, all that may not be easy in the moment but is ultimately nourishing for the people we are called to be. We hear the calling renewed: the church can easily be the house divided. We can name all those things that are from you as evil because of our fear of the different, the change of the familiar. We are mindful of these things as we turn to you. Hear all those things on our hearts that pull us away from the good that comes from you, all the struggles we face in our world. The pains of war, the pains of poverty and corruption, the pains of natural disaster, the pains of ignorance and apathy are weights that pull the world down from its place of service and care. Gracious God, from the big to the small, hear the weights that we carry with us and those we experience in the greater world. We pray all these things in the name of the Head of the House United, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray and be in unison, with one voice...

SERMON

The first time I met with my Christian Ministry colleagues in college, we went to an obstacle course on a campground as a form of trust and team building. One of those obstacles was a leap from a 20 or so foot high pole to grab a trapeze handle a few feet away. It was quite a jump for anyone. Of course, we were all equipped with harnesses, so there was very little chance of injury. I didn't want to give it a shot, but, driven by my new friends' peer pressure, I found myself climbing the pole. I couldn't even make it to the top.

I was bursting with fear before I could even get to the top of the pole, not to mention the opportunity to jump for the trapeze handle. So, I was paralyzed by fear, unable to go up or down. Oh, don't get me wrong; I was totally logical. I could logically make the conclusion that I would not be hurt if I stood at the top of the pole. I could logically make the conclusion that I could jump without getting injured with the harness holding me. But fear isn't like that. Fear can't be just thought through. Fear is more deeply seeded than that. So, I couldn't even make it to the top, no matter how much I thought through it. After about 20 minutes just being afraid, I had to let go and let the person holding my bungee cord pull me down. It felt defeating, because I knew that I let my fear control me, and I had to recognize that and sought to make sure that I wouldn't let fear control me in the future.

This morning's scripture passage comes from early in the ministry of Jesus. He is encountered by a crowd that was fearful and, controlled by that fear, said things that aren't true or loving. The crowd was paralyzed, and the good is called bad through that fear. As a result, the people aren't able to receive the transforming power of God. It was a danger then, and it is just as much a danger today when we are led by fear and not by the power of the living God. Let us look at this passage, see what the true stumbling block of the people was, and find how we can better live in the light of God having overcome the true stumbling block of the faithful: fear.

This is a confusing passage; a lot goes on without a lot of explanation on what is happening. Jesus had just appointed the twelve disciples and returned home to Nazareth, only to find a ruckus at his arrival. He can't even take the time to eat, there is so much going on. Even his family was not trusting of what he had done. The shouts rained out: "He has gone out of his mind!" and "He is the head of the demons and casts them out by his

command!" They made Jesus out to be something he was not: the head of the demons. We, of course, know that this is not the case. Jesus responded well; if you're on the same side, you don't damage your own efforts. "A house divided cannot stand." He caps off the discussion with a hard statement: "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin..." But we will get to that last part later...

It's only logical, something we know at the heart: "A house divided cannot stand." It's true for everything in life, especially the game Jenga. Sure, I could talk for hours about architecture, material, design and whatnot, but let's get more serious; I'm going to talk about LEGOs. There, you can see when things are unified, when you've built a good structure immediately apparent. Everything fits together well; there are no seams off. When a brick is off just a bit, the wall gets tipsy and uneven. That's just when a brick is not fully connected. When you have a split in a wall of bricks or any kind of LEGO structure, the model is compromised. How much more so when bricks aren't even connected! If they won't fit together, the entire process fails. You can't have half a LEGO model and call it successful. It's the same way with any body of people. You can't have three-quarters, half, or a quarter of a church; that's not the church. But we are not divided by practicalities or opinions. We are divided by fear taking our eyes off the Lord Christ and breaking us apart.

It feels easy to mock or correct, but the response of the crowd was very human and something we suffer from as well. It seems they hate Jesus and all he says. Not quite. They weren't against the ministry of Jesus and the ways of God, per se. What was driving them is not that they disliked Jesus but because they were afraid of him. They were afraid of the new thing he was doing, so far outside their understanding and experience. Jesus preached a new message; he did new things that made the people nervous. Let's be honest, fear is a

powerful thing, more powerful than we'd care to admit, and it makes us act in ways that aren't logical. They couldn't hear the words of Jesus because they were afraid. So how do we interpret change when it we are afraid? It's wrong! It's the work of the devil. It feels like it cannot be God's work because God makes us feel comfortable and good, but that's not scriptural logic. Jesus becomes the fear's focus, not the loving and caring savior that he is.

The most striking part of the passage can also be the most hard to interpret. "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin..." This passage can easily be misused to think if we say something unfortunate offhand, we are doomed to the fires of hell. That's not the point of this quote or the passage, so let's get to the bottom of it. The sin here is when we call things that come from God to be evil. That easily comes from fear. In this passage, what is good and called evil is the ministry of Jesus Christ. We might think it's hard to do, but it's happened a lot in the past. People used God to argue against what is good and called evil. The abolishing of slavery was one of those things. The Civil Rights movement was one of those things. Ordaining women was another one of those things called evil but was of God. The way that is most helpful to think about it comes from one of the commentators on the Sermon Brainwave podcast. It's a hard thing because people separate themselves from the God always calling themselves. There is little hope for those who cannot see the God-nurtured work among us; they separate themselves from God's work out of fear. The bottom line of the passage is simple but difficult: do not call evil what is of God. It's not new but a theme that runs throughout scripture. It's here; it's in Acts in a pointed passage. Peter keeps dreaming in Acts 10 of animals that were called "unclean," and a voice from heaven tells him to eat them. When he objects, the response is pretty similar: "What God has made

clean do not call unclean.” God is always working to create newness, and, as we have seen, that can create fear and uncertainty in us.

On the other hand, the reverse issue is simple and can be forgiven. There will be times when we are deceived by those who speak with good words but whose intentions below are less than admirable. But when we start seeing the world through the lens of deceit, we will miss when God’s mission comes through an unusual messenger. That was the case for Jesus Christ. His ministry, his words, his cause was so different than the people were used to that they saw him not through the eyes of finding God’s work at hand but through the eyes of fear. Those eyes can be helpful on occasion, but when we look at the world with the eyes of fear, the work of the church cannot go forward when God’s word often comes through the most unexpected of places as we see in scripture.

This is a good message for today’s church because the historic church has often sinned out of fear. “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.” “If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.” One of the most important parts of the ministry of Christ is unity despite difference. The disciples weren’t always of the same mind, nor was the early church but they were united in purpose. We find more faithfulness in moving as one in love than in nitpicking the smallest piece of doctrine. Tell me, how many times did we hear Christ debating doctrine in the Gospels versus all the times we heard him root out hypocrisy and hatred? Despite difference, unity is the cornerstone of what it means to be the church, and unity is the antithesis of fear.

In a couple of days, Darlene and I will travel to Annual Conference, in which we will be a part of theological and practical discussions that are wide-reaching. This is the year in which we will prepare for General Conference in 2016, and a lot of discussions are on the

table. There will be arguments. But the problem isn't always faithful understanding of doctrine; the problem is not that we do not understand our bibles. The problem is that many who argue in these conversations are afraid, and it separates us more than anything else. Each "side" in every issue feels that they will be excluded and seeks to exclude those they feel threatened by. This is not the way of Jesus Christ, and it saddens me that this happens at all levels of the church. We can easily change Christ's words to better suit the church of today: "How can Christians drive out Christians? If a Kingdom is divided against itself, it cannot stand. If a church is divided against itself, it cannot stand." It saddens me greatly that this is what the Gospel has become: something to be right about instead of how we can best serve others. And that is not based in doctrine; that's based in fear, where doctrine is the way we rationalize it. We divide Christ instead; we literally dissect the Body of Christ in the church out of fear. By fear we focus on excluding some based on different theological opinions, we find ourselves tearing down the church and not living the love Christ came to show all of us. By our fear, we destroy what by the Spirit of Christ we have built up. Fear cannot dominate the conversation, whether it is understood as fear or not.

One of the most integral pieces can be found in the very last piece of scripture. Jesus is teaching, and someone tells him that his mother and family are outside waiting for him. Jesus replies that his family is here; "whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." He does not define what that means here, but by the whole of scripture, we can get an idea. Jesus doesn't hang with the divisive folks who think they are right all the time but works with the humble who are always trying to learn more, seek to know God more, who know they don't have it all figured out, not presuming who is "in" and who is "out." Jesus sat among those who want to sit at his feet and learn what the way of God is

without judging and dismissing them. These can recognize that we all have fear, but when we are concentrating on the Gospel of Christ centered in love, fear is cast out. This is a lesson for us to carry forward in our work as the local and global church of Christ.

The people around Jesus were afraid of this new thing among them, so they reacted as any fearful people act. They tried to make the new thing among them as something evil. But Jesus deflated those messages and, in turn, sent us a message for all time. "If a house is divided against itself, it cannot stand." We live in a time of fear, just as they did, with so many diversified opinions in the church. There is space to agree to disagree. It is a renewed call to unity out of a simple basis reflected so many times in scripture: we should not call evil what God may be doing. But most importantly, the movement of the Spirit is always toward growth and unity in the church and beyond. We are not divided by opinion but fear masquerading as opinion, but ultimately, our purpose is the same. Thanks be to God for this everlasting calling and the power to carry it out! Amen and amen.