

Sermon December 29, 2024

A Messy Business

Second Reading: Colossians 3:12-17

Pastor Dan Peterson

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Grace to you and peace from God, the source of life, and from Jesus, who is that life of God and light in the world Amen. Today's message is titled "A Messy Business." In it, I do a little soul-baring, so please bear with me as we talk about the messy business of church.

As some of you know, I was a professor for over 10 years. I taught, first at Pacific Lutheran University, and then Seattle University. I loved teaching. Teaching, however, I discovered, could sometimes be a lonely endeavor. After all, students come and go. There's no permanence. It feels almost like an airport, where you greet people, perhaps momentarily, only to watch as they disappear.

One of the reasons, therefore, that I left academia was because I was seeking, seeking a more stable and enduring community, a more stable and enduring fellowship – not just any community, however, but one where people looked out and cared for each other, the kind where people would "bear with one another," as our Second Reading says, the kind that would "bear one another's burdens," as the Apostle Paul says in Galatians, the kind where people would die to themselves and rise in new life for others.

What I discovered upon becoming pastor at Queen Anne Lutheran Church is that Christian community is a lot messier than I thought. On the one hand, I have noticed, time and again, members and friends of Queen Anne Lutheran Church exhibit incredible, amazing generosity. I've noticed, secondly, how Queen Anne Lutheran Church excels at hospitality. That is to say, at welcoming people. One of the things that I love to hear as your pastor is, from someone who is new, how welcomed they felt at this church. I have also been awestruck by the way people here, the way you serve one another and this community through acts of kindness, charity and volunteering.

On the other hand, I have observed, since the beginning, tensions that exist among us in this church. I have observed conflict over finances, and the use of property; an

unwillingness, sometimes to take risks or try new things, and an underlying narrative of scarcity, where we tell ourselves we don't have enough – even though, God willing, we do.

In short, I've noticed that church life is messy, that this is a messy business, that it's a mixture of positive and negative, of good and bad, of saint and sinner. Now I share this with you, the latter part, particularly, not to make you feel guilty, to blame anyone, or to single anyone out; that is not who I am. But the fact is that *all* churches have conflicts and tensions like the ones that I have named here, evidence for which appears throughout the Bible, especially in the letters of Paul.

Sometimes we say or do things that hurt other people, just as other people sometimes say or do things that hurt us. When I was on my sabbatical at Princeton, I dwelled a lot first on the negativities of church life. I thought about how, as a pastor, people know that they can talk to me in ways that I cannot talk back to them. And believe me, as someone who came out of the womb arguing with the doctor, that has been a very challenging aspect of being a pastor. I thought about how difficult it is to forget the hurtful things that people, often unintentionally, might say. And I thought about the challenge it can be to remember all the *positive* things, like the generosity, the hospitality and acts of service I mentioned earlier.

Thankfully, as days passed, I increasingly began to realize more of the good things about our community of faith at Queen Anne Lutheran Church than the bad. This made me, by the time my sabbatical came to an end, more excited than ever to return, to share once more as we endeavor in our life together in Jesus Christ.

I like you, and I want that to be clear. I also recognize, as I've been saying, that sometimes, church community can be very difficult, and people get hurt along the way. Myself included.

Today, there is something else I'm excited to share. We have an incredible resource for navigating the complexities and ambiguities of church life. Can you guess what it is? The Bible. The Bible offers blueprints for how to live together as Christians. One of my favorites appears in Colossians, 3:12-17, our second reading for today. Take a look, if you will, at verses 12-13. The author writes, "¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

What do you notice here? What stands out in these two verses? For me, it's this line: "if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

That's our blueprint for how to deal with the messiness of church life. Forgive one another, as God forgives you. Now you might say, "That's great, Pastor Dan. I'm so glad you've returned, but where on earth do I start?" Here's how:

Number one: Identify someone you may have hurt, deliberately or unintentionally, over the past week. Maybe it was something you said, maybe it was something you did; identify someone you have hurt.

Second: Privately, ask God for forgiveness. I'll give you a moment...

Third: Today, over the coming week, or over the coming week, I want you to do one of two things. I'd like you either to apologize to that person, or, if it feels too uncomfortable or too risky, to resolve to treat that person differently by doing something kind for them.

And if you like, you can tell me how it went next Sunday.

Yes, friends and members of Queen Anne Lutheran Church, life is messy. It's full of ambiguities. It takes practice to get it right, which is why we share the peace and reconcile ourselves with one another every Sunday. You've heard from me, time and again, that worship is practice for how we as Christians should live in the world. It's difficult, but take heart. God forgives you. God forgives me. In Jesus Christ, God enables you, and God enables me, through the Holy Spirit, to forgive others and to ask for forgiveness. So, let's get to it.

In Jesus name,
Amen.