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## The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 10, 2023

### The Church Calls Sinners to Repentance

Jesus wants all people to be saved; his followers, members of the Church, share that desire. Like Jesus, therefore, the Church identifies errors and sins which lead people away from faith and endanger their faith relationship with God. In love we encourage erring believers to turn away from sin and return to Jesus. This call to repentance is known as Christian discipline. Though sometimes uncomfortable, it is part of our task as sharers of the gospel.

#### Sermon Galatians 2:11-16

**When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.**

**When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? "We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.**

Introduction - Without a doubt, the most important word in the Bible is love. Love explains how God feels about us and love summarizes how God wants us to feel about him and about others. The Bible says **God is love** and the Bible says that **love is the fulfilling of the law**. When it comes to our actions toward one another in the Church, the Bible says **Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience**. All of those are attitudes and actions that flow from love.

It's a sad fact of life that sometimes Christians fail to love, when people aren't compassionate or kind, or humble, or gentle, or patient. The Church always suffers when that happens. The Bible issues strong warnings against strife, and dissension, and divisions. I'm pretty sure that most of us here this morning could tell stories about what happens when conflict replaces peace in the church.

The focus for worship today seems to ignore just about everything the Bible says about love and peace. In the Gospel Jesus tells us to confront people who sin and to excommunicate them if they don't stop sinning. The Lord told Ezekiel the prophet to condemn his countrymen for their actions. St. Paul relates an incident when he opposed St. Peter face to face in front of everyone and accused him of being a hypocrite. So what's going on?

There have been plenty of times in the story of the Church when church members have gotten themselves into battles over silly things, things that didn't really matter. Sometimes the battles were skirmishes but sometimes war broke out. When things finally calmed down, most people—at least the wise people—were willing to admit

that some things just aren't worth fighting about. But today, we see the other side of the coin. There are times in the Church when conflict and confrontation and even condemnation are necessary. The situation with Paul and Peter in the Second Reading today gives us an example of that. We need to remember that

**Some Things Are Worth Fighting For**  
the purity of the gospel of Christ  
the safety of the family of God

When God created the plan to send his Son to the world as Savior, he knew his Son would need a family and a country. His choice was Israel and he called the Jews his own special people. To keep them together until Jesus came, God set down strict rules about their inter-actions with non-Jews or Gentiles. One of those rules was circumcision; Jewish males were circumcised as a symbol of their difference from Gentiles. Other rules had to do with entertaining and eating; conservative Jews would not invite Gentiles into their homes or share a meal with them. When Jesus came, all those rules became irrelevant. When his work on earth was done, Jesus didn't need a homeland anymore and so Jews didn't need to stay away from Gentiles anymore. There was a new concept: **So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith...There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**

The problem came up because some of the Jews who were Christians couldn't part with the old laws and the old attitudes. They came up to Antioch, a congregation with a lot of Gentile Christians, and insisted that the Gentile men had to be circumcised in order to be saved. This was a bombshell and the apostles got together for a conference in Jerusalem to straighten this out. Peter took the lead; he insisted that the rules God had given to the Jews did not apply to the Gentiles. All the apostles agreed. That should have ended it. It didn't.

Some time passed and Peter paid a visit to the congregation in Antioch. Paul tells us what happened: **For before certain men came from James**—those were the Jerusalem voices that insisted on Gentile circumcision—**Peter used to eat with the Gentiles.** In other words, he didn't observe the old hospitality rules. **But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.** So Peter talked the talk, but he didn't walk the walk. What he had said in Jerusalem was absolutely correct; what he did in Antioch was absolutely wrong. So what did Paul do? **When Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.** And what Paul said, he said for everyone to hear.

Paul was livid; his anger was white-hot. **How is it that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?** Everything we know about St. Paul—and we know a lot from the Book of Acts and his letters—is that Paul was a man of peace. He wrote to the Ephesians: **Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.** Paul usually did exactly that. So what changed here?

Paul knew there were some things that were worth fighting for. One of those things was the purity of the gospel. Paul knew—and really, so did Peter—**that a person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Christ Jesus.** That truth was the center of the Scriptures. The Christian Church stands or falls on that truth. Paul wrote later to the Romans, **There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.** When Peter gave the impression that the old laws and rules still mattered, he was selling out on Jesus' most important truth. Paul could not let that stand. What made things worse was this: **The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.** Peter's action were confusing other believers, even Barnabas, Paul's right-hand man. Their faith was in trouble. What was at stake here was the safety of the family of God and that was something worth fighting for.

No one wants to see controversies in the Church. We want to do everything we can to avoid harsh words and hard actions. The most important word in the Bible is love. But sometimes love has to be tough love. When fellow Christians fall into a serious and obvious sin and then refuse to repent, we have to confront them. Jesus

said so in today's Gospel. Faith is what connects us to God—that's a central truth of the gospel--and refusing to repent shows that the faith connection is broken. Words may have to be harsh and actions may have to be hard, but they may be the only way to lead people to repent and bring them back to Christ. The truth about Christ and the safety of God's people are worth fighting for.

Martin Luther spoke plenty of harsh words and took all kinds of hard actions against the Roman Church of his day, but what was at stake was the central truth of the Bible. The church's false teachings about the way to heaven were leading millions of people to hell. Ezekiel was in the same kind of situation. The people of Judah were in deep trouble. Their city and temple were destroyed but they were still revolting against the Lord. Ezekiel shared what the Lord said, even though it was harsh: **I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?** The truth about Christ and the safety of God's people are worth fighting for.

Many of you remember the difficult times when the Wisconsin Synod took a tough stand against the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Teachers in the Missouri Synod seminaries and colleges were openly teaching that the Bible contained errors and that it couldn't be trusted as the inspired Word of God. There were harsh words and the decision to break fellowship with the Missouri Synod was a hard action. There were some who resented that action; they felt it was loveless. There are some who still wonder about it. But what was at stake back then was the voice of God in the Scriptures and what was at risk was the confident faith of members of the Church. The truth about Christ and the safety of God's people are worth fighting for.

There's nothing we love more than peace in the Church. King David wrote, **How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity.** When life is calm and cloudless, we can spend our time and effort sharing and spreading the good news that Jesus forgives the sins of all people and that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life. Christians are always going to have differences of opinion on certain things. What we need to get rid of are arguments and disagreements that really don't matter. But there are some things that are worth fighting for. The purity of the gospel is one of them and the safety of God's people is another. Ezekiel and Paul and Jesus help us to understand that and believe it. Our prayer is that God will give us faith and love and wisdom to practice peace but to be ready to fight when we must. Amen.