

Today is the tenth anniversary of God's Work, Our Hands Sunday. The ELCA started this initiative to encourage congregations to walk out of the doors of the church building and into the neighborhood to make a positive impact on the community, because God's mission is fulfilled through the efforts of God's people. We are certainly called to share God's love in proactive ways—and the ideas of how to do that are nearly endless. Yet our readings today set the bar much lower. Before we even make it to doing something *constructive* in God's world, we're first told to just not be *destructive* in our relationships with others. You'd think that would go without saying, but both Jesus and Paul knew it needed to be said.

In the whole of the four gospels, Jesus only mentions the church twice: here and when he says he will build the church on the rock of Peter's confession. And what is the one assumption that Jesus makes about the church? That it will exist in conflict. This makes sense, because the church is people; and where two or three people are gathered, sooner or later there will be conflict.

Although most of us don't love conflict, it's not inherently a bad thing; it's just the cost of doing the business of living in community with other people. If the church is built on the confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, then that means the church is *not* built primarily on other shared experiences or beliefs—no matter how much we sometimes assume that it is: the church is not a community of people who all share the same ethnic background, or all appreciate the same music, or all vote for the same party, or all cheer for the same football team. We may hold some of those things in common, but even if we share *none* of those things, we are still united in Christ. That unity in the midst of diversity is a gift, but it can also be a challenge, because we can be very attached to those other aspects of our identity, and we aren't always gracious to those who identify differently. So the trick isn't avoiding conflict altogether, which is impossible, but handling it in Christlike ways.

Jesus anticipates times when we will find ourselves at odds with or even hurt by someone else and gives us an action plan for reconciliation. If someone sins against you, pursue them *for the purpose of regaining that one*. The ultimate goal is not to win the argument and get the other person to agree that you're right and they're wrong; it's not to get two or three other people or even the whole church to agree that you're right and the

other person is wrong. The end Jesus wants us to arrive at is a restored relationship. Which would you rather be: right? or in relationship? Sadly, we don't always choose the relationship. And sometimes the other person doesn't choose the relationship, but even then, they're to be treated like a Gentile and a tax collector...so long as we remember that Jesus was always reaching out to include Gentiles and tax collectors.

Jesus also gives us a hint for how we might better handle our naturally occurring conflicts *before* they reach the point of sinning against each other. Jesus reminds us that where two or three are gathered, he is there among them. We sometimes think of this as encouragement—and it is—that we don't need a cathedral full of people for the Spirit to be present with us. But we can also read it as a caution. Imagine Jesus saying it this way: *If you're with one or two other people, make sure you speak to them and treat them the same way you would if I was sitting there in the room with you...because I am!* We claim that God is always everywhere, but we don't always act like God is anywhere around when we say things, or do things, or tweet things that, deep down, or even right on the surface, we know are unkind toward others. If we wouldn't say it in front of Jesus, well, there is no time that we're *not* in front of Jesus.

It is pretty clear that even the first generations of the Christian church didn't do so great at putting Jesus' words into practice. Paul reminds the early church in Rome that the commandments God has given are not arbitrary rules but the most practical ways to love our neighbors as ourselves. *Love does no wrong to a neighbor*, he says. We could brainstorm all day about ways to serve our community, things we could do to make the world better, work that God might possibly be wanting us to use our hands to do...but nothing we could think up would be more important or make a bigger impact than to do *no wrong to a neighbor*. If we all did that, both individually and systemically, that would absolutely turn this world upside down (in a good way). Assuming, of course, that we let our definition of "neighbor" grow broader, and broader until all of God's creation is encompassed in that neighborhood.

I do hope you'll stay after worship today to take part in our God's Work, Our Hands project. But every day, I hope we all remember that the first work God calls us to do is to love our neighbor as ourself, and that first and foremost, love is that which does no harm.