

Sermon Title: “The Elephant in the Room, Part 1”

September 6th, 2020 – 14th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Matthew 18



Theme:

What's in it for me?

Sermon Text:

Grace and Peace to you from our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I titled this sermon, “*The Elephant in the Room, Part 1*” because we often deal with conflict in the Church by ignoring it, until we can no longer do so, and by then, dealing with it is usually extremely painful and has a lot of “collateral damage.”

In 1974, the Synodical President’s office received a complaint regarding Concordia Seminary. The Synodical President didn’t know it at the time, but this complaint would change the Missouri Synod forever, including how we as Christians handle conflict within the Church, and not necessarily for the better.

In our text today, Jesus lays out the framework for resolving conflict within the Church. Our Gospel Lesson starts out with the Disciples arguing over who is the greatest, something that is not all that unusual for teenagers to do today. Jesus brings in a child to illustrate a point that God defines greatness much differently than we do and to warn us against causing a child to sin. In other words, God is particularly upset when our actions cause the weakest among us to fall into sin. We need to bear this in mind when we use our Christian Liberties to make decisions about our lives. Jesus also uses the “Parable of the Lost Sheep” to illustrate how happy God is when we repent of our sins and come back to him.

Then Jesus gets into the thick of it when handling conflict within the Church. In verse 15 Jesus tells us if we have an issue with someone, go to them directly in private. This gives the person a chance to resolve the conflict at the lowest level possible and provides the best chance of a quick reconciliation. If he or she blows you off, then Jesus tells us in Verse 16 to take one or two others with you. This was to ensure an impartial witness. Both Jewish and Roman courts required the testimony of at least two witnesses, so this meets that requirement, should it get

to that point, but it also minimizes how many people are involved. The person still has an opportunity to save his or her reputation and resolve the conflict with only three or four people involved. In verse 17, Jesus lists the next step, should the parties not agree on a resolution. Jesus tells us to bring the dispute to the entire Church. Congregations during the 1st Century were still very small, so even at this level, there was still the opportunity to “save face” and arrive at an amicable solution. If the whole Church was unable to aid in a resolution, Jesus says let the person be to you as a “Gentile or Tax Collector.” Jesus was speaking to a Jewish Audience who would want nothing to do with Gentiles or Roman Tax Collectors. These folks were lower than the lowest dogs in the eyes of devout Jews. This is why Jesus uses this example to expel someone from the Church. Jesus then reminds His Disciples about the “Power of the Keys” the ability to forgive and withhold forgiveness. This is a great power and responsibility, not something to be taken lightly. Jesus concludes this section reminding His Disciples of who the Church really is, when two or more are gathered in Jesus’ name, there is the Church. Jesus promises that when this happens, He is also there.

So, this text serves as the basis for conflict resolution in the LCMS. Complaints against the laity are usually resolved by the Pastor and Elders in a congregation depending on the seriousness and nature of the allegations. Complaints against Clergy are handled at the District Level with some things having mandatory reporting requirements. In all of these cases, confidentiality is key. Jesus limits involvement to only those with a need-to-know, only expanding that circle when absolutely necessary. We are going to take a look at two cases, both of which are now public record, where that didn’t happen and we can see the repercussions of what not to do.

As you might guess, it is easier to complain to someone in an official position than to confront someone directly about his or her sin. Think about it, do you confront the customer at Costco not wearing his mask properly, or do you run to the first employee you can find? In 1974, this was no different. So, in 1974, someone complained to the Synodical President that “false doctrine” was being taught at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He contacted the Seminary President and asked him to investigate the allegations and report back to the Council of Presidents. The Council of Presidents is kind of like our Church Council, but for the entire Synod. It’s made up of all of the District Presidents, and the Synodical President and Vice Presidents. I don’t whether the Seminary President really investigated the complaints or not, but he reported back to the Council of Presidents that he could find no evidence of false teaching at the Seminary. The Council of Presidents was not satisfied with the report, so they

directed that the Seminary President go back and conduct a more thorough investigation and report back to them once again. They also launched their own investigation into the matter, to include investigating the Seminary President. Well, at this point, somebody leaked confidential information to the news media. (I know, it's amazing that the news media would even report on the LCMS, but back then we were big enough to be newsworthy.) This is where the investigations blew up in the investigators' faces and everyone got quite upset. The Synod fired the Seminary President and this led to many students and faculty walking out of the Seminary and forming their own Seminary, Seminex. They also formed their own Church body, which eventually merged with the LCA and ALC to form the ELCA in 1988. The LCMS still bears the scars of this incident 46 years after the fact.

After the Seminex incident, the folks that remained believed that with the departure of the "troublemakers," our problems were solved. The LCMS would recover quickly and put this issue behind us. In their eyes, the walkout proved the allegation of false doctrine, however many students and faculty based their decisions to stay or leave based on which professors they liked, more than a doctrinal divide. Others walked out because they were upset about the breach in confidentiality. In other words, relationships were more important than doctrine to those involved and how we treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Ending those relationships didn't solve the conflict, it just left people bitter.

You would have thought we learned our lessons from Seminex and made adjustments, right? How quickly we can forget. Around 2013, an economics professor at Valparaiso, who was also a rostered Pastor in the LCMS, wanted to debate the thorny topic of the Ordination of Women as Pastors. As you probably know, the LCMS only ordains certain men, and that policy is based on Scripture. This idea of a debate drew the ire of many in leadership positions, including the Synodical President and a disciplinary process was initiated against this professor. Even though Valparaiso University is an independent Lutheran University in Indiana, this professor was on the roster of the Northwest District and so it fell to our District President to handle this situation.

During a process such as this it is often helpful for the parties to "vent." Some healthy ways of doing this were keeping a diary or individual confession and absolution. Unfortunately, many people used Social Media platforms such as Facebook as their diary and in this case so did our Synodical President. Once again, confidential details were released publicly by accident, and this resulted in a Battle Royale on Social Media between this professor and our Synodical President. Lesson learned, don't use Facebook as your personal diary, unless you are able to

keep that part from the eyes of others. Our District President was unable to perform his task properly due to the leak as the goal goes back to our text today, of seeking reconciliation and forgiveness, but due to the social media war and undermining by other LCMS Officials, this economics professor felt that he was forced to leave the LCMS for the ELCA. At the 2016 Synodical convention, there was a proposal to transfer the disciplinary process of clergy to the Synodical President, "if the District President fails to act," but this was defeated. This incident also left many scars that we are still dealing with today.

So how can we avoid these kinds of issues in our own congregation? While we are not likely to see conflict rise to these levels, conflict is inevitable, and we need to take it to heart to solve it like Jesus would have us solve it. First, resist the temptation to run to the first official you see. Approach your brother or sister first. See if you can work it out. Once someone with an official title gets involved, people tend to be more on the defensive. If you are unable to resolve your conflict one-on-one, then go to your elder, Pastor, or your Congregational President. If you are still unable to get resolution, then reach out to our Circuit Visitor, Pastor Mike Wenzel, or the District Office, but most issues should be able to be resolved prior to these steps. As always, keep the issues on a need-to-know basis, only discussing it with the people who absolutely need to know the information. While we want to maintain proper transparency, conflict resolution often requires confidentiality. Remember, we want to bring people together so that we can all receive the forgiveness that Jesus earned for us on the Cross, not drive people apart.

As someone who has been tasked with investigations within the Federal Government, I have seen what happens firsthand when confidentiality is breached and when it is maintained. When we act properly, we can mitigate the harm that conflict within the Church causes. It can be an opportunity to grow. Sometimes God has us go through it because he's trying to teach us something. Look for God's lead in all of this. God has given us a great gift in His Holy Word. Turn to it. God has also given us a great blessing in the people of this congregation who serve in various capacities in this Church. God has put this service on their hearts and I truly believe that each person is serving to best of their abilities. They are not infallible, but neither are we. We all need Jesus' forgiveness and I pray we all learn from our past experiences so that next time

we run into a conflict; we are better equipped to handle it. No matter what, we know Jesus is here with us, and He will guide us through it, and will sort it out in the end.

In Jesus name,

Amen.

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Quotations from Scripture come from:

Various Authors. *The Lutheran Study Bible*. Concordia Publishing House. Kindle Edition.