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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Pentecost 14
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, the year was 164 B.C., the day was the 25th of the Jewish month of Kislev.

That day in history marks the origin of the Jewish festival known as Hanukkah.

Hanukkah, if we didn't know celebrates the purification and re-dedication of the Jewish Temple.

Exactly three years before on 167 B.C., on the 25th of Kislev, amidst the persecution of the Jews by the Seleucid leader Antiochus Epiphanes, the altar in the Jewish Temple was polluted with pagan sacrifices.

And in response to the persecution they suffered, the Jews rebelled against the Seleucids and eventually the Jews reconquered Jerusalem.

And upon defeating the Seleucids, the Jews were able to worship again in the Temple.

But first it had to be purified.

Now they didn't used Clorox wipes to wipe everything down.

And they didn't have sanitation stations around the Temple for people to clean their hands.

And they didn't practice social distancing.

No, the Jews back in that day were not dealing with a highly contagious coronavirus.

No, the Temple was unclean because the Seleucids, who were Greeks, had conducted pagan sacrifices using animals that were "unclean" according to Jewish law, for example pigs.

And so, in order to clean the Temple, the Jews needed to rebuild the sanctuary, consecrate the courts, make a new sacrificial altar, as well as new holy vessels.

And then, when all those things had been done, when the Temple had been thoroughly cleansed of all impurity, then on the 25th of Kislev in the year 164 B.C., the new altar was dedicated with Jewish sacrifices.

And song, and music, and joyous worship filled the Temple for eight days.

PAUSE

I think about that dedication today...

I think about how the ancient Jews were able to come together again for Temple worship...

I think about all of that because here we are, gathered in God's house again for worship.

We have had to do our own cleansing of God's house and now here we are.

Thanks be to God. And thanks be to our Covid-19 Taskforce for their hard work to help reduce the risk of infection as we reenter the sanctuary.

Yes, today have re-gathered in God's house of worship. Let God be praised indeed.

PAUSE

Now, with that said, I want to shift gears.

I want to shift gears to talk about communal life within the church, for that is what our gospel reading today addresses.

I want to shift gears and talk about communal life, specifically I want to talk about conflict.

PAUSE

Now, we should know that worshipping communities are not without their conflicts.

Many people assume that because a community is a "religious community" that somehow it is immune to conflict.

We think that because the members of a community are good, faithful people, that they would never have an argument with each other.

Ho, ho. How wrong we are, right?

To be sure, wherever we have a gathering of people, it is inevitable that there will be differences of opinion, which can lead to conflict.

And so, to the contrary of what we might believe, churches and other religious communities are prone, almost more so, to conflict, because church members tend to be very passionate about their community.

We invest our time and our energy and our financial resources into our church, and so we become quite passionate about our church.

So, yes, conflict exists within the life of the church.

PAUSE

Indeed, sisters and brothers, if we have been reading our Bible, and if we have been paying attention to what we are reading in the Bible, we know that conflict in the church is nothing new.

When the church was still in its infancy, there was already “conflict.”

There was conflict in the early church, for example, over the issue of circumcision.

Many Jewish Christians were arguing that Gentile converts had to become Jewish before they could become Christians.

Jewish Christians were arguing then that Gentiles must be circumcised to become Christians.

And we can only imagine how that news went over with Gentiles who wanted to become Christian.

“I have to do what to become a Christian? You’re kidding, right?”

So there was that general conflict in the early church.

PAUSE

But then there were also specific conflicts, conflicts of a specific kind that emerged in particular communities.

In the church in Rome for instance, there was conflict.

The conflict there was the result of a particular edict issued by Emperor Claudius.

You see there were disturbances in Rome that were the result of clashes between Jews and Christians.

Jewish Christians were preaching in the Jewish synagogues in Rome.

The Jewish Christians were proclaiming in the synagogues that Jesus is the Messiah, who is Christ crucified.

And the Jews in those synagogues didn't like this and apparently there was enough of a ruckus created that it got the attention of the Emperor and he issued an edict, whereby the Emperor expelled the Jews from Rome.

And this included not just the Jews proper, but also Jewish Christians.

And then, some time later that same edict was rescinded and Jews and Jewish Christians were able to return to Rome.

This, however, caused tension because the Gentile Christians had been running things in the churches at Rome during the absence of the Jewish Christians.

And now the returning Jewish Christians wanted a stake in the churches in Rome.

And so tension emerged between the Gentile Christians who had been holding down the fort, so to speak, and the Jewish Christians who demanded their former role in the life of the churches.

And so, Paul is writing to the churches in Rome about this conflict.

PAUSE

And then there is the conflict in the church at Corinth.

And boy was there conflict among the Corinthians.

We read in that correspondence that people are taking sides, saying they belong to Apollos, or that they belong to Cephas, or that they belong to Paul.

People are being disrespectful of each other, such that they are going ahead and eating before others arrive at church gatherings.

And even when they do eat together, some have more than enough food for themselves, while others have nothing at all to eat.

There is even sexual immorality among them, such that one member of the church is said to having sexual relations with his father's wife, his stepmother.

It has gotten so bad that there are members of the church who are suing each other in Roman courts.

Not good, right?

PAUSE

So again, Christians are not immune to arguments.

We are not immune to conflict.

And, because we are reminded today in our gospel reading about conflict, it seems like it is most appropriate to refresh our memory concerning the Church Covenant we created not so long ago.

A copy of this covenant hangs in a frame above the table that is to the immediate right of the doors as we enter the sanctuary.

The covenant is also found in each of the rooms around the church.

So, we should be able to refer to it easily enough, whenever need would arise.

It reads as follows:

CHURCH COVENANT OF OUR SAVIOUR LUTHERAN.

We are a congregation formed by the grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As such, we seek to...

- 1) Support each other and build each other up,
- 2) See "Christ" in our neighbor, and be "Christ" to our neighbor,
- 3) Interpret our neighbor's actions in the best light possible,
- 4) Speak charitably and respectfully about and to one another,

- 5) Refrain from hurtful actions,
- 6) Remain impartial in conflicts and listen with a neutral ear,
- 7) Agree to disagree without animosity,
- 8) Accept another's apology,
- 9) Ask for forgiveness,
- 10) Pray for understanding, and when necessary, pray for reconciliation.

And then the covenant concludes with the words from Ephesians 4:32, which read, "Be kind one unto another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as Christ Jesus has forgiven you."

PAUSE

Now, I have often made the analogy that church life like being in a crucible.

A crucible is ceramic or metal bowl-like container in which metals or other substances are placed and which then are heated to very high temperatures.

That is how it can sometimes feel being in a community with other people.

Peoples' tempers can get hot. Conversations can get very heated.

And things can get very uncomfortable.

It can feel like we are in a crucible subjected to adverse conditions.

But, the purpose of a crucible is to put metals or other substances into it, and subjecting it to high temperatures so as to transform the contents into some valuable product.

That is what the church can be like.

Not that we seek out conflict. Not that we desire conflict so as to transform the community.

No, but a community committed to each other will sometimes deal with conflict.

And that community that is committed to each, that works through its conflict can be transformed to something better on the other side.

And the church is unique in this way. It is one of the few, if not the only, institution in society in which part of its mission, and no small part...

Part of the mission of the church is to learn to be in relationship with itself.

I don't know of any other community in our society that claims that as its mission.

We seek to find peace in community, which is Christ's body.

We seek to find reconciliation among our membership.

In the business world there is the Human Resources department that serves in part to deal with problems among employees.

But, the church is its own human resources department.

And ultimately the church's handbook containing the "Employee Policy and Procedures"...the handbook describing the expectations of behavior is that. (Point to the cross.)

Jesus Christ died on the cross that we might be forgiven our sin and that we might be made right in our relationships not only to God but to one another as well.

Being church is not easy.

It is difficult at times to live in faith with others who like us are passionate about God and the church.

And so, we need to be easy on ourselves and to be easy with our sisters and brothers in Christ.

Because Jesus Christ has been easy on us, forgiving us, and caring for us in community. Thanks be to God. Amen.