

The Elephant in the Sanctuary

Ed received this sermon from an interim pastor and wanted to pass it on to you. Peace,
Robin

Grace, mercy and peace to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. I've been standing in this pulpit for almost eight months now. Truthfully, sometimes it seems like forever and sometimes it seems like merely the blink of an eye. Sometimes I have desperately wanted to drive up the highway and never come back. Sometimes I wish I could stay forever, which I can't.

But one thing is sure and constant in all my emotional swinging back and forth. I've come to love this congregation.

We've gone through three phases of my preaching – in the beginning you were hurting so much that I focused on comfort. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Jesus gives us his peace. Let yourself rest in the Lord's arms.

But comfort isn't the only aspect of healing. An infected wound needs the dirty old bandage taken off and the wound needs to be cleaned out. And that hurts. Some of you weren't too happy with me during that time. You didn't like what I was saying nor how I was saying it, which makes perfect sense because it hurt and you didn't want to hurt anymore.

For the last couple of months, between my family

responsibilities and the holidays, I've preached more traditionally. I spoke about giving thanks for all God's given us, anticipating with open hearts and hands the coming of God-with-us, celebrating the birth of the Christ child. I decided that any further movement in the transition process could wait for the New Year.

Well, it's 2007 now.

We've been through some things together. You've seen me in good times and hard times. I hope that by my actions and my words I've conveyed to you how much I care about you. So that now, when we look at some hard things again, I hope we can be open with each other. Talk to me. Let's sit down together and talk as the people we are – individual members of Christ's body who are bound together ETERNALLY by our baptisms through the Holy Spirit.

This week I've come to realize, in listening to you in various situations that we've cleaned out the wound, but it's still there. It makes me think of my uncle who, to this day, wears an ace bandage on his leg over a wound he received in WWII that never goes away. It's not infected, but the open wound is still there.

This congregation was born in conflict. From the beginning you've had "us versus them" factions. I don't know the earliest ones, but recent ones included: for the pipe organ versus against the pipe organ, wanted to move to the new location versus didn't want to move to the new location, for homosexuality versus against homosexuality. And the one that I believe is starting to surface now – the "we need to get back to normal versus we need to do something new" conflict.

In the middle of all this "us versus them" conflict blame starts to fly – it's the pipe organ committee's fault, it's the

Synod's fault, it's Churchwide's fault.

And depending on your personality type, you start fighting with each other or you run.

The truth is that when there's an "us versus them" problem on the surface, underneath there's also a Jesus problem. What are you hanging your hearts on, what are you trusting, when any conversation about money or calling a new pastor sends you right back to your corners either fighting and blaming or running and blaming? I don't know what you're trusting, but I do know that you're not trusting the Good News of Jesus Christ.

And what does the end of our Gospel lesson say Jesus does when people reject him? "He walked right through the crowd and went on his way." Jesus walks away.

Listen to Jesus' mission statement again:

God's Spirit is on me; he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free, to announce, This is God's year to act!

WE ARE the poor who need to hear the Good News

WE ARE the prisoners who need pardon

WE ARE the blind who need our sight restored

WE ARE the battered and burdened who need to be set free.

Sisters and brothers, we CANNOT free ourselves. This "us versus them" scenario that plays out over and over again in this congregation is your elephant in the sanctuary just like alcoholism is the elephant in the living room of so many homes. The first step toward true peace is admitting that you are powerless to change it. Your addiction to conflict is stronger than you are. It's a spiritual disease that needs a spiritual

cure.

Jesus says to us all:

The Spirit of God is on me

Jesus says, I have been chosen to be Good News for you

Jesus says, I have been sent to tell you that your sins have been pardoned by my death on the cross

Jesus says, I have been sent to give you back your sight

Jesus says, I have been sent to set you free

Jesus says, I am here to tell you, This is God's year to act in this congregation!

Can you trust that Jesus is speaking to you? To You, individually, and To You, as a congregation? To You, Today?

That's what he's longing for us to do. To open our hearts and minds and hands to him, admitting we've got a problem that we can't fix and laying it down at the foot of his cross.

We need to have a service of repentance, a time to gather together, admit our addiction to conflict and turn back toward Jesus, trusting that he will care for us and carry us forward, HE will give us a way to be God's people in this place even if that instinct for conflict is still here. No matter what that future looks like, Jesus Christ will walk with us from this moment forward and throughout all of eternity.

We need to have a time like we see in our first lesson in Nehemiah where God's people came together after their captivity and time in exile to renew their relationship with God and re-commit themselves to being God's people in that place.

But I'm not going to initiate such a service, it's got to come from you. And I need a representative from both sides of the "we need to get back to normal versus we need to do something

new" divide to come to me and ask for it. Otherwise, it'll be a waste of time and make the conflict worse.

Until you come to grips with the reality of this congregational instinct for conflict, realizing that only through Christ will there ever be true peace here, it's not going to matter what your budget is, who your pastor is, or what your vision statement says. You'll just go around and around on the conflict merry-go-round until you run out of money or people or both.

The Creator of the Universe loves you so much that He sent His Son to teach you and heal you, die and be raised to new life so that you can be set free and see the greatness of what God in Christ is doing for YOU.

THIS IS GOD'S YEAR TO ACT!