

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer; Amen.

I've always loved history. It was my favorite class in school. I was fascinated to learn things about the history of America in particular, especially in the parts of America where my family resided. I remember writing many papers about civil wars and world wars, but there was one assignment in particular that I remember better than all of the rest. We were in fourth grade and we were learning about the Lincoln-Douglas debates. For those of you who need a refresher, these were also known as the Great Debates of 1858. There were seven of them in total; featuring Abraham Lincoln, the Republican candidate for the United States Senate and the incumbent senator Stephen Douglas, a Democrat. At this point in our history senators were elected by state legislatures. And they were both trying, for their parties to win the Illinois general assembly. The main topic of the discussion during the debates was slavery, even though Illinois was a free state. As we learned about these debates our history teacher thought it would be a good idea for us to have debates with our classmates on topics chosen by her.

One of my best friends and I were paired together for these debates. And we were given the assignment of debating smoking in public. We talked about it and talked about it, but we just couldn't decide who would take which view point. We were both very opposed to the idea. After all my generation was the "drug free, just say no generation." Finally, after much discussion and arguing, I decided that I would bite the bullet and defend smoking in public.

When I sat down and started to make points for my arguments I had a bit of trouble. How would I defend something that my fourth grade self was opposed to? How would I or could I convince someone else to believe something I didn't even believe? I had no idea, but I knew I better figure it out if I wanted to win my debate. And I did what every fourth grader would do, I

asked my mom. She suggested that as I prepared my points I talk to those who actually smoke in public, since no one in my family smoked. So I began my preparation by sitting down and talking to people who smoked. I asked them why they should be allowed to do it in public when others didn't want them to. My research was fascinating. And although my opinion didn't change, at the end of my debate preparation I at least had some respect for those who smoke in public and understood the viewpoint of those who thought differently than me. It helped me in life, not just in debate points.

As I did my research I noticed something. The more I listened to others opinions, the more I learned and understood. And if we look at our gospel lesson for today, which is a pretty difficult gospel lesson to swallow because it's extremely difficult for us as humans to do, I noticed that the word "listen" occurs four times. It occurs twice when speaking to our fellow church members, it occurs when we talk those in the church and it can even be argued that our Father in heaven is listening to us.

The church is no stranger to conflict and confrontation. Any time you have a group of people gathered together in one place who feel passionately about anything there are bound to be disagreements. Some disagreements are small, such as where you put the coffee pot. And some disagreements are big, like interpretation of scripture or a building project. But what is important to remember is it's not actually the disagreements that matter, it's how you handle them.

Today Jesus is laying before us a method of how to handle disagreements. And as I pointed out before, listening is at the top of his list. Jesus begins with listening because when we are able to truly hear someone, and know from the place that they are coming, our heart softens towards them. But sometimes our hearts are so hardened that we can't hear what our fellow

church member is saying. And we lose our patience with people, and we don't listen as we ought.

And I want to point out something small, but perhaps meaningful, that will hopefully help us to think when we lose our patience. In our translation of our Gospel lesson Jesus talks about "a member of the church". In the original Greek the word is actually translated as "brother". I think that makes a difference. It shows that our connection to those who sit among us here at church is different than just someone else who belongs to the same club or sports team as us, they are actually our siblings, in the waters of baptism. It makes our bonds stronger. It should make us care about them a great deal more than just someone we pass on the street. It should make us want to work through our conflict with them.

Although, you know, people we pass on the streets are important as well. As I was thinking about this text and the recent disagreements we've had here at Salem and the extreme disagreements the world around us seems to be having, I have been thinking a lot about my role, about your role, about the Christian community's role in conflict. I think we have a big responsibility. How we handle conflict, how we handle disagreements, the way that we view people is actually a part of our witness, a part of what we show other people about who Jesus is. When I see Christians on tv shouting and screaming at one another, being extremely judgmental, using foul language, or using scripture out of context it makes me so frustrated. I get frustrated because I don't want the world to think I am the same way as they are, but more importantly I don't want them to think that Jesus is the way that they are.

The way that we act as followers of Jesus matters. It matters how we speak to each other. It matters how we feel about our brothers and sisters. And a part of loving one another, which by the way is what Jesus asks of us, is discussing the inevitable disagreements that are bound to pop

up when you gather a group of people together to live, study, and journey in faith together. And, yes, I actually mean discussing, sitting down and listening to one another, not going home and allowing our frustrations to fester and eventually blowing up, or yelling at one another, or walking away and pretending the other person doesn't exist.

In this gospel lesson Jesus has that father finger out. Can you feel it pointing at you? He's wagging it at you and saying I expect you people to act like grown-ups. I expect that you can live in community with each other and love and value one another, because you have all been created in my image, and work through things. I expect that you will listen. I expect that you will involve the community. I expect that you will learn to live together in community, because I have given you that community as a gift. And I know you're going to mess it up, that's why I'm giving you these instructions.

When people think about churches, when I think about church we get the image of something similar to cheers in our heads. We picture a place where we come to worship, study, and fellowship; a place where everyone gets along. A place where you matter and are valued. A place where you are accepted just the way you are; a place where you're never lonely. And yes, a place where everyone knows your name.

The difficult part about community is it is made up of people. I've always said the church would be a much better place without us, with just Jesus. But Jesus, our fearless leader, calls us into community with one another. So the question becomes what kind of community do you want to be and how much work are you willing to put into it? Being in community is hard. Loving one another in spite of our flaws is challenging. And not walking away when it would be so much easier and instead sitting down and listening to someone else, valuing both their opinion and view while you may not agree is work. Are we willing to do that? Jesus sure thinks so.

In the midst of this big challenge we have in front of us this morning, hear Jesus' promise to us. He doesn't only promise to show up when we all agree. He doesn't promise to show up when we get things right and follow his instructions. Jesus promises to be with us wherever two or more are gathered together. He promises to be with us in the midst of our disagreements, hoping beyond hope that we will do the right thing and work it out for the sake of our community and his kingdom.

So I ask you today, brothers and sisters, what will our witness be? Will it be another hypocritical group of Christians who profess Jesus and can't get along with one another or the community they live in? I pray not. I pray that we will heed Jesus' advice and see community, both at Salem and in Lititz as the gift that God intended it to be. And I pray that our witness of listening and love will be the light of Jesus for all those we meet. Amen.