

Let us pray,

Lord help us to make tough decisions, so that the believing community may live a life together that you so desire.

Amen.

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Lets talk about excommunication!

That's not something we hear everyday anymore!

In this time of mass exodus of religious folks from churches, especially mainline churches.

It is hard to believe that there would be anytime that we would need to excommunicate someone.

When a church has only lets say 50 members, which is the median attendance of the ELCA currently, it is hard to believe that we would want to get rid of anyone at that point!

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But in all seriousness, excommunication is not about getting rid of people.

I mean, it is, but it isn't.

Excommunication has typically been used as a last resort when a member of a faith community has done something wrong, like really wrong.

Typically they have caused significant harm in some way and has done something so egregious that we can no longer have them in our presence.

Or, they continuously cause problems with no signs of remorse or change of behavior.

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This is kind of a difficult topic to discuss because pretty much every single Sunday I stand up here and say, forgive one another. Turn the other cheek, be the better person even if the other person is not.

But there does come a time, especially when we live in community, when an individual or individuals need to leave or separate themselves from the group.

Excommunication typically, is not meant to be a life sentence.

It is the last ditch effort to show the person or persons that the way they are behaving or have behaved are not conducive to a safe, loving and caring community.

And that they are always welcomed back when they are ready to ask for forgiveness and work on changing their ways.

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But its important to note that this is not an individual decision, either..

This is a communal one.

So the pastor or the council president can't just oust people they don't like.

It is a communal responsibility, to maintain the safety of the group.

There is a reason we have prisons after all.

Sometimes, people just need to be removed from normal society.

Now again, this has been abused, continues to be abused, as there are a bunch of people in prison who shouldn't be there.

Or especially aren't given ample opportunity to change or improve.

The system is broken, but that doesn't mean we don't need prisons.

We live in a broken world and sometimes our solutions to a broken world are broken themselves.

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It would be wonderful if we all just followed the teachings of Jesus and we all recognized and were open to when we did something wrong or hurt someone and learned and grew from that.

But unfortunately, that is just not always the case.

Hence the need sometimes for excommunication and prisons.

It is a difficult thing, asking people to leave a community.

And this doesn't just happen with church, think of our own lives where there are people in our lives who we just need to put some distance between them and us.

There are just times where loving from a distance is necessary.

And I also want to make it abundantly clear, that the responsibility of mending that relationship is on the one who harmed it.

Sometimes it can be really easy to victim blame.

It can be easy to say, well we just need to be more forgiving.

That is true that we could always be more forgiving.

But just like with us and God, there has to be some acknowledgment of wrong doing.

If we forgive with no apology or ask of forgiveness, what is it that we are forgiving?

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It is always the responsibility of the one who harmed, to be the one to mend the relationship.

And with excommunication, this can muddy some waters.

Because so often the person being excommunicated doesn't think they did anything wrong, and then thinks that the community owes them an apology for kicking them out.

And then its this whole thing about who hurt who, who hurt who more, etc., etc.,

So what in the world do we do.

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Well we do our best.

We keep the doors the open.

We acknowledge that in life we ourselves are not perfect.

That hurt people do indeed hurt people.

Recognize that we are all both victim and perpetrator.

It can be very dangerous when we think that we are always the victim.

Because we are not.

And so when we enter into something as extreme as kicking someone out of our lives.

We must handle it with compassion, care and a willingness to keep the door open when we are ready to mend the relationship.

Even God kicked God's own creation out of paradise, until we were ready to mend the relationship.

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Unfortunately for God, that time never came and God had to just figure out how to love us how we are.

And you know what, after saying all of this, maybe in the end, that's what we all need to do too.

Just figure out how to love each other how we are.

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Because to be honest with you.

Life is just too fragile and short to hold grudges, to insist that we are right, to claim to have some sort of moral superiority.

We all have harmed and have been harmed.

And this world will be a much better place if we can learn how to acknowledge wrong doing, accept forgiveness, and give forgiveness.

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I know that Church overly optimistic sometimes.

The messages can seem a bit far fetched.

It can even seem a little boring, sometimes.

Maybe we can get annoyed hearing the same message every week.

Or get annoyed hearing the same message every week and nothing changing in the world.

That gets annoying for me, personally.

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The reality is, this faith of ours isn't necessarily meant to be exciting.

Its not meant to be on the bleeding edge of innovation or cultural relevancy.

Its not designed to be a fad.

Its meant to change who we are in our souls.

Its meant to help us live a prosperous and healing life with one another.

Its meant to teach us what true love looks like amongst broken and damaged and hurt people.

And maybe a rock band can help get that point across.

But it shouldn't be the reason we go to church.

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Its easy to love excitement, dopamine, and perceived perfection.

Its easy to want quick fixes.

Its easy to just kick someone out and forget about them.

Its easy to push quote on quote problem people into prisons and never think about them again.

But that isn't reality that Jesus wants for us.

There is a reason why Jesus mentioned visiting people in prisons when questioning whether his followers loved him.

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Because the Christian reality is, that the way of Christ is slow, boring, broken, uncomfortable, and long.

Its about showing up for each other and God even when it may not be exciting or glamorous, or convenient.

The truth is, the life of Jesus was not exciting, glamorous or convenient.

He didn't party with the royals, he suffered and died with the poor and the outcast.

So maybe, that's our calling as well as people who follow him.

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We are not called to always be seeking the next high or the next best thing.

We are called to do the hard work of living amongst those on the bottom, the unglamorous, the imperfect, the boring and even the misbehaved.

I pray that God give us hearts that are open to the long road of discipleship.

Energy to do what is right, not what is easy or excitingly fleeting.

And most important of all, I pray that we never have to excommunicate anyone.

Amen?

Amen.