

Sometimes, the more things change, the more they stay the same. 2,000 years ago, the early Christian church was rife with disagreements over how to interpret Jesus' teachings. Fast forward to today and little has changed. In the US alone, there are more than 200 different Christian denominations, each with their own interpretation of the Gospel. Do they all get along and play well with each other? Not really. Even in the Lutheran denomination, there are more than 30 different "types" of Lutheran churches. And the division doesn't stop there. Region to region, state to state, synod to synod, church to church, even congregation member to congregation member – everyone has their own interpretation of the Gospel and what it means to act and worship as a Christian. I'll wager there were a few heart palpitations this morning when I said the words, "contemporary service."

The disciples, that select group that traveled with Jesus day and night, hearing his message over and over, revealed that they are just as human as everyone else – first, by arguing amongst themselves in the previous passage about which one of them is the greatest disciple, and now by complaining to Jesus about someone who is not part of their group doing work in Jesus' name.

How does this go over with Jesus? Not so well. Instead of congratulating the disciples on their watchfulness or reassuring them that they are the A-Team, he tells them to chill out. He says, "Look, we're all playing for the same team. It doesn't matter who scores the goal." He warns them that *they* themselves are the ones in danger of doing the harm to other believers, especially those who are new in the faith and are the most vulnerable to stumbling.

Now, the truth of the matter is that each and every one of us places obstacles in the way of the Gospel at one time or another. Yes, sometimes it's completely intentional, especially when trying to protect our power or status or our way of doing things or our comfort level within the church. But sometimes it's completely unintentional. We may have the best intentions in the world but we just don't think about the impact our words, actions, or attitudes have on those around us. We forget that others – especially children, new believers, new members – look to us for guidance, follow our examples, and are vulnerable to our criticisms and conflicts. These obstacles, whether intentional or unintentional, whether they cause others to stumble or just ourselves, can damage the Good News we're trying to share.

Jesus' reaction to this inter-conflict among believers is harsh. 'Better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone around one's neck than cause another believer to stumble in their faith'. He's letting us know that this is a big deal. If we're preoccupied with worrying about what everyone else is doing, we're not sharing the Good News. We're not doing what He's asked us to do. We're losing our saltiness.

I wrestled with this sermon, not because it was particularly difficult to write but because I felt like a hypocrite. I struggle not to feel self-righteous and finger-point at other Christian individuals and groups that I think are dreadfully wrong in their interpretation of the Gospel. I have to trust that God is at work among all of us. He has called this worldwide community of believers to be the salt of the earth, despite our arguments, prejudices, conflicts, and self-righteousness, despite all of our flaws. He excels at using the imperfect and we are living examples of his grace. We need to remind ourselves that all Christians, whether we agree with them or not, whether they are leaders or followers, conservative or progressive, tolerant or fanatical – all

of us belong to the same community, sing songs of praise, listen to God's word, and share the body and blood of Jesus Christ. "Whoever is not against us is for us." We need to remind ourselves that we are one body, called to share the Good News of peace and love and salvation. Keeping that focus is what will keep salt within ourselves and keep us at peace with one another.