

**The Greatest Love You can Show to Your Brothers and Sisters...
...is to oppose them to their face.**

If you are a registered Republican it may be hard to decide who is really ahead in the polls; Romney, Santorum, Gingrich, Bachmann, Cain, Huntsman, Paul, Perry? It appears that the media is only showing you the top two in the polls and disregarding the rest. You have to do some digging to find out what these candidates really stand for and what their plans are when they are seated in the Oval Office. Republican Presidential candidate debates are a source of information. If you've missed one, do not fear, there will be many more. I personally tend to get frustrated with these debates. To me they tend to be very accusatory in nature, one politician pointing out where another has made poor policy choices, slamming each other with quotes from books and interviews. Take comfort, there will be only one more month of this... and then... President Obama and his Republican challenger will bicker back and forth for the next twelve months.

As you listened to our lesson from the apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians, you may have had this picture in your mind; two presidential candidates sparring in front of television cameras, the apostle Paul at one podium and the apostle Peter at the other. But this was not the case.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul tells them, **“When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.”** (vs11) What could Peter have possibly done that warranted a public tongue lashing?

In the Old Testament the LORD had required his people to follow regulations and offer certain sacrifices to remind his people that the Messiah was coming. Once Jesus came, he was the fulfillment of the law and all of the Jews customs. And so, in Christian freedom Jews were now free to eat a pork chop or ham sandwich, but if they wanted to continue to eat kosher, that was fine, too. Peter, we're told, used to eat with the Gentiles – non-Jewish people who had converted to Christianity. He, as a Jew, did not strictly observe the traditional Jewish customs – and that was fine. But that was before certain men came to Antioch. Then he suddenly withdrew his seat at the Gentile dinner table and sat exclusively with the Jews, as Paul explains, **“because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.”** This circumcision group was Jews who had converted to Christianity, but forced Gentile converts to follow Jewish customs, including circumcision. By their actions they were teaching that in order to be saved, an individual had to keep Moses' ordinances and ceremonies rather than trusting solely in Christ's merits. By his example Peter was forcing Gentiles to follow Jewish customs.

Do you see why it was necessary for Paul to oppose Peter to his face in front of the whole congregation? Peter was asleep inside a burning building and Paul had to wake him up and drag him out. It was the greatest act of love Paul could show a brother in Christ. For if Paul had not confronted Peter, the Gentiles (and the Jews for that matter) would go on believing that they must obey Jewish ceremonies in order to be saved, rather than trusting in Christ's merits alone.

What Paul did was nothing more than what Jesus commanded his Church to do. In the gospel this morning, Matthew 18, Jesus said, “When your brother in Christ sins, go and talk to them, one-on-one.” When you see a brother or sister in Christ persistently sinning, and they continue in their sin, whether they are aware of it or not, we are to confront them. Jesus tells us that our purpose in pointing out the sins of a brother or sister is to snatch them from the burning building in which they have fallen asleep, so that they may not die but live. The greatest love you can show a brother or sister in Christ is to oppose them to their face as Paul did with Peter.

So, what does that look like at the congregational level? It begins with the pastor and elders. By definition of their jobs they are to care for the spiritual welfare of each member of the congregation. They represent the congregation when they go and call the impenitent to repentance and announce forgiveness to those who do

repent. But Christ has given this responsibility to each and every member of his Church. That's all of you. One of the ways that this ministry takes place is with inactive members. By definition, these are communicant members whose shadows have not darkened our doors for four consecutive weeks or more.

We realize there are exceptions: those who are deployed, homebound because of health, or because of work schedules are not able to attend on Sunday morning. The Board of Elders serves these members with home visits and mailings. But even then, currently almost 30% of our congregation is inactive. By their inactivity in worship and Bible study we have to ask, "Is failure to attend worship and Bible study a persistent sin?" Lest we be guilty of legalism, we have to ask, "What God say about this?" He says in his Word that Christians will have a joyful attitude toward worship and Bible study and will want to go to worship (Ps 122.1). He also tells us in his Word that he wants his people to gather regularly for worship and Bible study (Heb 10.24-25). He furthermore tells us that those who know the good they ought to do and do not do it, sin (Heb 10.26ff; Jms 4.17). In other words, they are saying, "Yes, I know I should be there, but..." they allow the worries and anxieties and pleasures of this world to take priority in their lives before their God and his Word.

The problem does not lie with them alone. God tells us that it is our responsibility and duty to confront them on this, just as Paul approached Peter, as the prophet Ezekiel warned us in the First Lesson, "You are to be watchmen. If you do not speak up, they will die, and you will be held accountable." How well are we doing that here at Faith Lutheran? Well, we first must look to our leaders, our pastor and the elders. I admit, we could do much better. Then each of us must examine own our efforts. How well have we carried out this ministry to bring the straying sheep back to the fold?

In his commentary on the letter to the Galatians, Martin Luther wrote, "This [story] is recorded for our benefit. Even the saints sin, even they err. But no person has ever sunk so low that he cannot rise again. On the other hand, no person's standing is so secure that he may not fall. If Peter fell, I may fall. If he rose again, then I may rise again."

Paul wrote in our lesson, **"I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me."**

When I look at myself, I see plenty of sin. When I look at Christ, I see no sin. I see my Savior who always called sinners to repentance, who wasn't afraid of confrontation, even with his friends. Remember when the disciples were arguing as they walked along the road – who among us is the greatest? Jesus waited and later on he asked them, "What were you talking about on the road?" He pointed out there sin, but gave them the opportunity to repent. He even reached out to Judas after he betrayed his Lord and Savior, because he wanted him to be saved. When his arms stretched further than they should, and fastened to a tree with large spikes driven through his hands, with those same arms he reached out to the sinners, offering forgiveness. There I see no sin, but perfect love, perfect shepherding of the lost, perfect pastoral care.

It is that perfect love that sought me out and gave me the gift of my faith at the baptismal font. It is that love that sought you and gave you your gift of faith through Water and the Word. Your faith now connects you to him. Your faith connects you so intimately with Christ that Christ may say, "I am that big sinner. I am guilty of failing to speak, failing to love, failing to pray for the lost. Your sins and your death are mine because you are joined to me and I to you." Faith connects you so intimately with Christ that God sees no sin in you, because through faith, Christ's death and his life are yours. So intimately are you connected with Christ that he is the innocent one made guilty for you; and you and I, the guilty ones, are declared innocent by the Father.

So that I never doubt God's love for me, Paul wrote, **"I live by faith in the son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me."** For me... he means me, and you, and you. He stands face-to-face with me in his Word and in his Sacraments and reaffirms his love, "This is my body and this is my blood given for you." He means you. You are forgiven of your sins.

That means I have a new life. Paul describes that life, “**And I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.**” Maybe you’ve been following this trial in Europe... an American, Amanda Knox, was convicted of murder, now she is appealing her conviction. If she were to be set free, what kind of life would she live after being behind bars for four years? We can only speculate. But with our new life in Christ, we don’t have to speculate. We know what kind of life we will live.

The life we live will follow the example Paul set for us this morning. We will oppose our brothers and sisters when they have sinned. Maybe *opposed* isn’t the best word to describe this. After all, Paul reached out to Peter in love. Perhaps *reaching out in love* or *encouraging in love* would be better. Since this is the kind of life we will live it will help us to know who those people are who have been missing in action. I’m sure you know at least one or two brothers or sisters in Christ whom you have not seen for a good long while in worship or Bible study. Others you don’t know, or, you’ve just forgotten because they’ve been gone for so long.

We’re going to help in that area. Next month your newsletter will contain a new feature – the Stewardship calendar. Every Monday through Friday, you will see printed the names of all the families here at Faith. On each day, pray for that particular family - whether they are active or inactive. We pray, that by holding them up before God in our prayers, he would then use us to then encourage our brothers and sisters in love.

The way we can do that – by contacting them; through phone, email, a knock on the door, or a letter and say, “We miss you. Haven’t seen you in a while. Is there anything we can help you with? We’d love to see you return to the place where you can drink the waters of life and eat the bread of life and find hope and comfort and strength and forgiveness.” I’d like to challenge the congregation and the board of elders and me... let’s set a goal, if it is God’s will, in six months 90% of our membership will be active in worship and Bible study. When those wandering sheep do return, we will welcome them back to the family with joy and a warm embrace, and we will thank our God.

My dear sisters and brothers, Christ lives in you because he loves you. Let his love move you to seek out your brothers and sisters and to bring them back to Christ. Amen.