

10-15 SermonA17Pentecost19

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

Have most of you heard of Charles Dicken's novel A Tale of Two Cities? Yes? Well, today's message is sort of like that except I'm going to give today's message the title A Tale of Two Churches. The two are depicted on the Sunday Page covers. If you would, please take your Sunday Page out now.



You're holding a picture of one church in your hand. Take a good look at it and make a note in your mind about how you think the people in the picture are feeling and how things are going at that church. Now ... I'm going to pause for a moment so you can glance over at your neighbor to the right, left, front or back and get a good look at the other picture. How do you think things are going at this church? How are the people in the picture feeling?

Keep those thoughts about the two churches in your mind while you listen to the opening of today's novel: A Tale of Two Churches. Keep in mind that the names, continent, denomination and pretty much every detail of the story have been changed to protect innocent churches everywhere.

Chapter One:

The disgruntled members of the Ncam-bed-lana parish picketed outside the venue where members of the Methodist Church were holding a farewell ceremony for a church leader.

The group had gathered as early as 9 am outside the Assemblies of God Centre brandishing placards saying: "thieves must go".

A few meters away, inside the hall, other members were already singing church hymns as the service was about to start.

Waving placards and shouting phant-si nga-masela" (which means down with thieves), the group walked into the premises and stood at the entrance of the hall trying to get the attention of the church's leadership.

Church member Mz-wan-dile Majova said the bone of contention was a decision by the leadership structure ... to remove the superintendent minister, the Reverend Gco-bani Vika, of the Ncam-bed-lana Parish.

The group complained that the leadership tried to remove Vika without consulting them and without following the church's constitution, which states that a superintendent should stay in his post for two years, provided he has not transgressed any rules.

Members claimed Vika was removed because he had accepted a request from church members that a forensic investigation be conducted into the church's finances.

"He only got here in January. The reason why they want to remove him is because he was impartial and had accepted a decision from the parish's quarterly meeting. That decision was to request a forensic investigation," Majova said.

In a letter to the national leader of the Methodist Church Bishop Zipho-zethu Siwa, the disgruntled group wrote:

"The presiding bishop and his executive committee ignored the formal complaints and concerns made on several occasions regarding the mismanagement of funds, dissension, and strife in the parish during the era of the former superintendent. Now the current superintendent is being crucified for... the exercise of good governance."

Neither Siwa nor the bishop of the Clarkebury district under whom the Ncam-bed-lana parish falls. Bishop Victor Tsh-angela, could not be reached for comment at the time of writing.¹

Now ... think back to your days in elementary school reading time or junior high school English class. What comes next? What happens after you've heard or read a chapter in a book when you are in school? 🌀 You get to take a quiz. 🌀 Today we're lucky because it's only a one question quiz. Before we take the quiz though, please take out those Sunday Pages again and mark the picture with the lady on the ladder "Church A" and the picture with the people holding signs "Church B." Ready?

Which of the two churches pictured on the Sunday Page covers did we just hear about?
 “Church A” or “Church B”?
 “A” or “B”?

Everyone who thinks we heard the story of “Church A” please raise your hands. ☞ Everyone who thinks we heard the story of “Church B” raise your hands. ☞ Hmmmmm I noticed that there are some people who didn’t raise their hands. You either don’t want to give the wrong answer or maybe you want another option Everyone who thinks the church we heard about is both “Church A” and “Church B” raise your hands.

Yes, both “A” and “B” is the correct answer. Remember I said that the names, continents, denominations and details were change to protect the innocent. The truth is that both churches are filled with redeemed sinners just like every one of Christ’s churches on Earth. There is no perfect church. There are no perfect people in any of those imperfect churches. The trouble is that sometimes we expect other people and/or we expect ourselves to be perfect. That expectation breeds internal agony like the kind that St. Paul appears to be talking himself through in his letter to the Philippians. That expectation creates dissention and discord within the church. It also fosters disrepute and accusations of hypocrisy from the community when we impose the expectation of our version of perfection on people outside the church.

I invite you to turn your now to chapter four of St. Paul’s letter to the church assembly at Philippi in Macedonia. Paul loved this church! He called it his crowning joy. Schooled in Hebrew that would have meant they were his circle of protection, his compass, the people who would sacrifice all for him and for whom he would sacrifice all. Yet, we can see that this beloved church also causes Paul to agonize over some of the things that go on within that community of faith. Scholars have an on-going debate about whether or not Euodia and Syntyche, the two women that Paul mentions, are at odds with one another or not. Some scholars speculate that they had conflicting personalities. Other scholars say that Paul was only urging “mature people to have the same thinking as himself”² and aspire to spiritual maturity over and above everything else and worry less about the rest. They believe that Paul is asking the community to help Euodia and Syntyche find peace by focusing on

spiritual matters. Either way, the church at Philippi is heavy on Paul's mind and his heart. BUT ... and this is an important "but" ... but the Paul doesn't love them any less because something about the church makes him uncomfortable and possibly even causes him pain. Paul doesn't love them any less because they aren't perfect. Paul loves them with Christ-like, *Father-They-Do-Not-Know-What-They-Are-Doing* love.

Back in 1997 Janet Letnes Martin and Suzann Nelson published a book called Growing Up Lutheran. That book became a popular musical called *Church Basement Ladies*. It celebrated in story, song and dance the women who work in church basement kitchens preparing Christmas community dinners, funeral meals, fundraiser feasts, and wedding receptions. They steer left of potential disasters, share recipes, instruct the young, debate the rules, keep the pastor on track, revel in one another's company, irritate and tolerate one another. On November 18, 2016, the Plymouth Playhouse in Minnesota celebrated the 3,000th performance. People love the show not because the characters are perfect but precisely because they are not perfect. They are Euodia and Syntyche and Paul. They are you and they are me.

In verse eight and nine of chapter four today, Paul reminds us of a way of being and thinking that he learned from Christ and of the promise that comes with that way of being. The promise is a promise of peace and the way of being is fixing our minds on what is right instead of what is wrong. Let's close with his words:

If there is any excellence and anything worthy of praise dwell on these things ... and the God of Peace will be with you always. AMEN

¹Sino Majangaza, *Church Members See Red Over Minister's removal*. Dispatch Live, November 16, 2015. Web

²Marg Mowczko, *Euodia and Syntyche: Women Church Leaders At Philippi*. Marg Mowczko, August 4, 2011. Web