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I might have told you this story before, but I come from a long line of pastors, and I had a great-great uncle, Karl Heinrich, once who had an issue arise in his congregation, and so he left it, along with half of the congregation. They then formed their own congregation. A few years later, another issue arose, and he left that congregation, along with half of the people. They then formed their own congregation. Finally, a few years later, an issue arose in that congregation, and he left it. But none of the congregants would follow him, and so he was a pastor without a congregation, without colleagues and without a denomination...and he fell gravely ill, and on his deathbed he asked for the sacrament of Holy Communion, but no one would bring it to him, because he had fought and disagreed with everyone about church matters. His wife had died years before him. Even his sons, also ordained pastors, refused to bring their own father communion because they had stubbornly stopped speaking years before. Finally, my great-great-uncle, immigrant from Germany, ordained Lutheran pastor, died alone.

Since then, each generation of pastors in my family has suffered from division, due to various issues. I was born in 1972. When the Missouri-Synod split in 1974, my family was divided. Family reunions were not joyous affairs, but tense ones, with uncles going into cigar-smoke filled studies and slamming the door and not coming out till it was time to eat. We could hear them fighting over the Bible, over church politics, over the role of women in church. Sometimes they would even shout, and their wives, my aunts, would exchange horrified glances as they cut pies and fried chicken.

This is what I was born into, ironically, a church divided over the role of women. Given the tension of those times, I swore to myself even as a little girl that I would never raise my children in a divided church. Later, when I became a pastor, I swore I would never divide a church myself. When I was little, it never occurred to me that I would grow up to be a pastor myself, and that simply for doing that, most of my family immediately either disowned or discredited me. A family divided over church matters.

When I became ordained and came to the Calamus Lutheran Parish, it never occurred to me that we would ever face an issue that would divide us. This parish is filled with strong-minded (not bullheaded!) Norwegians and Germans...all of whom have come from splits and divisions before....first when Our Savior's split back in the fifties and when Faith split in the late eighties. So all of us have within our memories either firsthand experience of division or the story of that division passed down from mom or dad. I swore it then and I swear it now, I will not divide this church. I will lead no such split.

And so these days we face the issue of human sexuality. I am not going to discuss the issue itself from the pulpit, because, as is true of most issues, it makes for a better dialogue than sermon. Also you are all invited to the Adult Class during Sunday School hour, during which time we will participate in a four-week study of the ELCA's social statement on human sexuality. So, while I am not going to talk about the issue itself during this sermon, I will simply use this issue as an illustration of challenges that the church faces, and has always faced.

Let me be clear. Our parish is not divided. While our congregations at the moment have differing wedding policies, one allowing for same-gender marriages and one not,

this is not the division I am talking about...in fact, when the dust settles, I think we will see that this is really a beautiful example of how the ELCA embraces both sides of this issue. So, while our parish isn't divided over this issue, some families are, and some have chosen to leave. Other families have chosen to come. Many are blaming me for this issue...for even bringing it up, which is funny because when this issue was first brought up in the ELCA, I was 16...and at 16, I was much more interested in going to prom than I was in what the ELCA was discussing. My personal opinion holds no bearing on how councils vote on this issue. I love and pastor folks who fall on both sides as well as those in the middle who are indifferent to the whole thing. It is my calling to walk with you all.

So while I understand that my role as pastor might make me the lightning rod for this and other issues, that's fine, I'm stronger than I look. But if we're looking for someone to blame, if we really feel the deep-seated need to blame someone, let's take another look at the Gospel text for this morning...the one in which Jesus says, "I've come not to bring peace, but division..." Hmmmm....I suppose we *could* blame Jesus for all this upheaval...after all, he's the one brandishing the sword...he's the one sounding the bugle...he's the one leading the charge...not me. So we could blame Jesus for this issue and all the other divisive issues we've seen over the past 2000 years, issues like...whether or not our males should all be circumcised...whether or not we can have friends who are not Christians...whether or not women can speak in church...whether women should cover their heads in church...the church's taking money from people in exchange for a ticket to heaven...the authority of the Pope...whether or not priests could marry...whether or not to let black people join the church...whether or not to let women vote in church...which other denominations we could share Holy Communion with...whether bishops or clergy can ordain a pastor...whether to let gay people join the church...whether to allow clergy to divorce...whether to allow divorced people remarry in the church...whether to ordain women as pastors...and now the question before each ELCA congregation is whether or not to allow same-gender marriage to take place within their individual congregations. This comes in a long list of divisive issues that the church has wrestled with since its conception.

Look at the letters Paul wrote to the first Christian churches and take note of the disputes he had to settle, the disagreements he had to arbitrate, the splits and mergers that took places in the very first churches, even before the first building was ever built, 2000 years ago, when congregations still met illegally, by night, in people's homes, at the risk of arrest and death. So, let's together realize that the nature of the church is broken from the beginning, and it is broken because it is operated by broken people. So, let's not put our faith in the church. Let's put our faith in Jesus. And let's not expect perfection from the church. Let's expect perfection from Jesus. All of these issues—all of them—(and these are but a few examples) were painful and difficult to work through, every bit as challenging as the one before us now...

And when things are painful and difficult, we look for someone to blame...and so, like I said, you could blame me if that's important to you...or you could blame Jesus, if you're really brave...or you could blame no one...because this is simply the nature of the church...and it always has been...And maybe, just maybe, we should look less for someone to blame and more for someone to thank.

I see no reason for blame at all. In fact, I see the very opposite...that Jesus should not take the blame for our splits and divisions, but rather that he should be thanked and

worshiped all the more for faithfully loving a quarrelsome, argumentative church full of people....and somehow he still manages to look at us lovingly...and somehow he still manages to stick with us, in life and in death...and somehow he still manages to love us to the point of dying for us on the cross...and somehow still delights in giving us his kingdom of heaven...I see no place for blame here, only praise and thanksgiving.

I am reminded of the gorgeous readings we had this summer from the book of Colossians, and the cosmic reality that “in Christ, all things hold together.” This might not seem like good news for the here and now, when we in the church scrap and argue and fight and split and merge and divide and reunite...but it is in fact very good news, because it means that in Christ, all things are held together, the yes’s and the no’s, the aye’s and the nay’s, the red cards and the green cards...that the universal embrace of a Christ that is Lord not only over me and you but this entire universe is capable and willing to hold together things that do not necessarily belong together and things that don’t even *want* to be held together, that it is Christ’s desire to hold it all together somehow, that the division we might experience now will be healed in Christ’s time...that the things we break now will be mended in Christ’s time...that the pointing finger and the shaking fist will become the blown kiss and the warm handshake...that there is a future, and it does not belong to us but to Christ, who holds together things and people and places we cannot even begin to comprehend, and that that together-ness will happen, maybe not now, maybe not tomorrow, but one day soon.