

-There is a story that was told in a presentation a couple years back at a pastor's conference I attended about about a little country Lutheran church in South Dakota (I can't remember where exactly). This church, like many other congregations, was proud of its heritage and history. The pastor who told this story reflected that everything about this congregation seemed healthy and strong when they accepted the offer and became the church's first-call, newly ordained pastor. They were really excited, of course, to start their ministry. And then came what this pastor nicked-named "altar-gate". The church altar, being close to 100 years old, was falling apart. To be honest, it really wasn't built in a way that was meant to be permanent. It was obviously made up of recycled wood from a farm somewhere and it was crudely nailed together. One entire leg of it kept falling off and needed to be "jerry-rigged" to stay on while Holy Communion was being blessed. "The altar needed to go," the pastor thought. So, they started to put feelers out about getting a new altar and was met with surprisingly strong resistance, especially from one family. "My great grandfather nailed those pieces of wood together and it should be sturdy enough to last for another 100 years", one of grandmothers of this family (who was also highly involved in the church ) said. Interestingly enough, another person in this family (one of the uncles) suggested that they re-use the wood from the current altar and build a new, stronger, more permanent altar from that. This, too, was met with great resistance from the grandmother and several other members. "The altar is fine just as it is," she stated. The pastor worked with this uncle to come up with a compromise: they would take wood from the same barn that the wood came from for this altar and build a new altar. They would then put this new altar in the sanctuary and "phase it in" by putting it close to the old altar and getting the congregation used to celebrating Holy Communion from it. So all of this takes place, and the two altars sit together upfront in the sanctuary. One day, the pastor walks into the sanctuary and discovers the addition of yet *another table* sitting in front of the two existing altars. Another member, who had a woodshop and made furniture for a hobby, heard that the congregation was looking into getting a new altar and decided to take 6 months and build a beautiful cherry table with carvings of bible scenes and accents all around. "I wanted to surprise the church!" this member told the pastor. "It's a gift". Thought this table was by far the most beautiful table of the three, it created absolute chaos and divided the congregation into three groups. One group sided with the grandmother and the original altar, the other group thought the "new/old barn wood" altar was the right choice, and yet another was taken with the newly carved table. Each group, of course, threatened to leave the church if their altar wasn't used. The pastor, not having really dealt with conflict before, tried to make peace with each of the groups and it was decided to put wheels on each these altars. To this day, a different altar has to be wheeled up and set in front of the sanctuary in order to satisfy each group. "It's absolutely ridiculous," recalled the pastor at this conference who has since moved on

from this congregation. They finally lamented at the end: "I wish I had had the courage and knowledge to know that making peace just for peace's sake wasn't worth it in this case."

-One of the things on surface that we like to do is chastise and characterize the Pharisees of Jesus' day as the "bad guys". But, as our gospel story lays out for us today, the relationship with Jesus and the Pharisees was much more complicated. The Pharisees (or as I have said before-the teachers/professors if you will) were in some ways the reformers of Judaism. They didn't believe Judaism should be centered around one big Temple as the Sadducees (or Jewish priests) did. If one lived according to the law of Moses, that's all you needed. No Temple is necessary. This, ofcourse, is Jesus' line of teaching as well, except Jesus takes this reform further: one only needs to understand and live out the "heart" of the law of Moses in order to be part of God's work in the world. So what you have here in our story today is not the Pharisees chastising Jesus over theological issues, but over Jesus rocking the boat too much.

-"Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you," they say. Sure, teach that stuff, but let's cool off a little bit. Let's make some peace first with the Sadducees and the Romans before we start reforming. Could it be that the mistake of the Pharisees was not that they disagreed with Jesus so much as they were willing to advocate for three altars in the sanctuary?

-Jesus, unfortunately for them and in some ways unfortunately for us, is not about unity or peace for peace's sake. You will never find Jesus in the bible having a beer with the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the Romans and advocating for everyone to "just get along". Jesus' mission in and to the world is to show the radical, unimaginable kind of love/justice that God has for creation. Period. That is what the single altar that Jesus advocates points to.

-The problem is that we get so enthralled and attached with the altar table, that we forget and even reject the entire divinity it is pointing to.

-"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" These aren't words of anger or of cursing. These are words of lament.

-Jesus is lamenting the fact that the love of God he is preaching and showing is rejected again and again.

-There is this old theological notion that I think is very flawed which states that Jesus HAD to die in order to take on our great sin. God MADE Jesus die to take on our wickedness. There are many things that are super problematic with this church teaching that is still very much in the mainstream which I don't have time to get into this morning. But, I think this out of date theological position, which is backed up by this story, is actually backwards. God didn't MAKE Jesus die, we just fell in love with our own altar.

-Jesus keeps on with his ministry after this passage. He keeps on preaching and teaching. He keeps rocking the boat and not settling for some half-baked "compromise" just to make peace. His life is uncompromisingly modeling God's love for ALL. Yet, the powers that be in his time and place and dare I say even today reject that love for ALL people and ALL things. We would rather live to have our grandfather's altar in the sanctuary than live to break bread with a stranger. I read someone's blog post summing up Jesus' words in this passage by writing: "To me, Jesus says: I'm going to keep loving even when you want to kill me and it's killing me." Jesus laments our rejection, yet the body of the risen Christ keeps standing and pointing to the uncompromising Good News.

-How many altars do we need in our sanctuary? What kinds of things does this congregation shy away from to "just make peace and not rock the boat"? Let us, this Lenten season, be challenged and be opened to this radical love. Let us not be afraid to trust one another and go deeper. May this church have the courage to be focused on the love of God and not get distracted by the altar. Amen.