

## The Elephant in the Room

It's been quite a week here at Peace, hasn't it? In case you haven't seen the pictures on Facebook, we had some wires come down and some fire in the woodchips of our playground. There were fire trucks in the parking lot during our service on Wednesday. Not exactly the reason we call that day Ash Wednesday, but there were a lot of jokes about having ashes for next year. Unfortunately, that wasn't the biggest event here at Peace in the last seven days. Given all that has been happening, I decided that it might be a good idea for us to talk about the elephant in the room.

That's kind of a funny expression, isn't it? The idea is that there's this giant elephant in the room with you, and everybody is acting like they don't see it. But they edge around it and look the other way so many times that somebody finally has to acknowledge that it's there. Of course, it's a metaphor for when we human beings try to go on as if nothing were happening. We have this hope that if I don't talk about it, if I just go on like I always did before, maybe the elephant will just go away. Sometimes that even happens. But most of the time, it doesn't. You have to address the elephant in the room to move forward. You know what? As scary as that can be, most of the time, once you admit that elephant is there and start trying to deal with it, you feel better than you felt when you just pretended like it wasn't.

So what is the elephant in the room here at Peace? Well, let's start with our teacher situation. You probably know that our 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher resigned last Sunday. The Lord called him to carry on a ministry here. He came to serve in that ministry. But he reached the conclusion that it would be best for us and for him if he resigned. Christian love requires us to take his words and actions in the kindest possible way, so let's accept that he felt conscience bound to do that. But that doesn't change the fact that it leaves us in a difficult position. And I have spent many, many hours this week working on it. We're going to have a voters meeting later today to address it. All our school parents are concerned about just exactly what this is going to mean for the education of their children for the next three months. We can't just throw away a third of the school year. Those kids need to be ready for school in the fall. Obviously, the loss of confidence that some parents may feel toward our school could hurt our enrollment and our mission next year. All that is the elephant in the room.

But it's not the only one. We've called nine different men to serve as our principal and 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. Eight of them have returned our call. The man currently holding the call, Benjamin Leibl, has indicated that he hopes to have an answer for us by next Sunday. It's been discouraging to hear those letters declining our call. It's been hard for me to read them. You almost don't want to hope because you don't want to be disappointed again. Just like last year, we can only call until the first week of June. If we don't have a man in place by then, we'll have to wait until November to call again and I'll have to serve another year as principal. I think we can agree that no one wants that to happen.

Two elephants in one room would be pretty crowded. But there's a third: our financial situation. It's been getting progressively worse for at least six months. Thrivent holds our mortgage and they informed me this week that if we don't make a payment by the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, we will be in default of our mortgage. Even if we do make that payment, we're two payments behind, so every 15<sup>th</sup> we'll be in the same position until we get caught up at least one month. The truth is, even if they don't declare us to be in default, late payments hurt us. The penalties and interest prolong the life of the loan. Sadly, the list of unpaid bills is growing. Offerings are falling. We have to recognize the realities of our financial position.

But you know what? There's still at least one more elephant in the room: our attendance continues to decline. People just aren't coming to church. Too many families disappear when their kids graduate from our Lutheran Elementary School. Too few of our teenagers, too few of our young adults, continue to worship faithfully. That, too, is an elephant that we all know is there, but it's hard to talk about.

It seems that we have a whole herd of elephants in the room. Those things cause an emotional response. I would lying if I said that they don't make me wonder what I'm doing wrong as your pastor. If you care about our congregation and our ministry, those things have to distress you. But we have to face them. We can't take our ministry seriously if we're not willing to admit these problems exist and that they're threats to the work that we have gathered here under God to do.

But that doesn't mean we should worry about them. God promises us that all things are in his hands. Taking threats seriously is something God calls us to do. But he tells us not to worry. He tells us to trust in him and his promises. How can we do that? We begin by understanding how we get into these situations. One part of that is simply the fact that we live in a sinful world. Bad things are going to happen to us here. The Church is going to struggle because Jesus hasn't come back yet. He never promises that it's going to be easy for us. In fact, he promises us just the opposite. He promises us the cross. He says that life is going to hurt. He says that he lays that cross on our shoulders, that he sends the challenges and the pain for our good. What good? Through those crosses, he teaches us to trust him. We can't solve these problems on our own. We can work at them to the best of our ability. We can and must be faithful. But all the power and all the wisdom are his. He has to overcome the problems of serving him in a sinful world.

He has to overcome the devil, too. The devil hates us and our mission. He works every day to make it harder for us to preach the gospel. But all that doesn't mean we have no responsibility for our problems. We do. We're sinners and we often make our situations harder than they have to be. Sometimes we do it without meaning to. Being a sinner means that my judgment as your pastor and your acting principal isn't always right. It means that I lose sight of things sometimes and say the wrong things. It means that I make bad decisions sometimes and I make it harder for everyone here to work. The same is true for our teachers and for all our lay leaders, and even for every one of you.

But it's worse than that. We all do and say and think and feel sinful things, things that we know are contrary to God's will. Those sins always hurt the preaching of the gospel. So we don't want to give more. We grouse and gossip about the choices that are made. We give up and act and talk like God is no longer in his heaven. All that sin hurts our mission.

But Jesus is still our Savior. He died and paid for all the sin in my heart and in my life. He did the same for every one of you. Jesus washed all our sins away – all the stupid choices and weaknesses, and all the sinful words and actions and thoughts and feelings. All that is wrong with us, all that is imperfect in us, all that hurts the preaching of the gospel is paid for and forgiven. And it's also overcome by the gospel. The good news about Jesus is the very power of God. It is more powerful than my failings as a pastor. It's more powerful than the sins and shortcomings of our teachers and our lay leaders. It's greater than all your sinful failures as members. It is the very power of God to change hearts, to make believers out of unbelievers and, just as important, to grow us believers into the committed, generous, hard-working people God calls us to be. The gospel is God's solution to every challenge that the church on this earth faces.

The same Jesus who died and rose and then sent the Holy Spirit to us to proclaim that gospel promises that he will be with us to the very end of the age. He promises that he will heal our hurts and comfort us when guilt attacks. He promises that he will control all things for the good of his Church. He promises that his Church will endure until he comes again. He promises that whenever we come together in his name, he is here. He promises that his Spirit will work when we preach and teach, when we baptize and celebrate the Lord's Supper. He promises that he will always give us what we need.

And he promises that he will hear and answer all our prayers. Do you know what Jesus tells us to pray for? One thing is workers. He tells us to ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers out into his harvest field. This is his harvest field. Pray for workers here at Peace. Pray for the workers we need to finish this school year and for the workers we need for next year. Pray for the workers God has already given us here at Peace and at HVL, including our faculty and all the lay people who serve our ministry, too. Pray for the financial resources we need to do the work God has given us. Pray for your own faith to be mature enough for you to consistently bring a generous offering to the Lord. Pray that God would grow your faith so that you are committed to our work and so that you serve him as he has enabled you.

You are a child of God. He has given you this church and its schools. Be thankful for that blessing. Now, God has not promised that our congregation will always continue or that our school will always be open. Be while they are here, pray for them and work for them. Have an attitude of trust. With all these elephants in the room, it's easy to be negative. I mean, what's an elephant really like? They smell bad. They take up space. They aren't very conversational. They get downright mean if you threaten them. So it's not surprising that those elephants in our room are making life tough for us right now. Acknowledge the difficulty, but trust in your Lord to do what is best for his Church on earth. Trust that that includes you. Jesus died for your sins.

He's not going to abandon you now. Until he makes it clear that he's closing the door for our work here, let's assume that the door is open. Let's commit ourselves to doing the work God has set in front of us.

Let's talk about how we can do it better. Let's listen to each other and let's choose to be positive about our situation. By that, I don't mean that we should pretend like life in this world doesn't hurt. It does. It hurts me to see our ministry shaken by these events. I know it hurts you, too. But trusting in the Lord means that we know he always does what is best for us. Let's choose to reflect that trust in our words and our actions. God has not forgotten us. When he lays a cross on us, he does it because he loves us. Accept his cross with joy and faith.

And let's be generous with our time, generous with our gifts, generous with our prayers. Because God doesn't call us to just sit back and wait for him to do miracles. God calls us to go out into the world and work while he does miracles. God does not call us to sit in the pews and wait for our pastor to serve us. God calls us to join with our pastors and teachers and lay leaders in carrying the gospel into our community. God does not call us to sit at home and grouse because no one has noticed we aren't there. God calls us to come and hear the word and engage with our fellow Christians – even those who may have offended or hurt us. They're sinners just like we are. We all need to confess our sins and repent. We all need to forgive each other, just as Christ forgave us.

And Christ did forgive us. He forgave for all the times we didn't do those things. He forgave us for all our failures to work and be generous and be positive. His blood washed all that sin away. Now, renewed by the Spirit, let's deal with the elephants in our room. Let's ask God for wisdom and maturity of faith and love for each other and for the lost. And let's do the work that God has set before us. Amen.