

Dear People of University Lutheran Church,

The other day I was sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper and our cat Pepper was lying on the floor next to my feet. Sometime later, his sister Piper came up the basement steps and was walking through the kitchen, when Pepper for some reason jumped on her back attacking her. A wrestling match ensued. It ended with a terribly upset Piper biting her much bigger brother on the ear, and with Pepper running away and pouting. As I thought about this, my mind wandered to recent public behavior of our government officials in Washington DC during this time of the coronavirus.

Now, I recognize that Pepper and Piper were to some extent playing. However, when they were fighting or play fighting, they were not being kind to each other. In fact, they were being mean and had no bones about their intention to inflict pain on each other. I'm sure it is virtually impossible to teach cats about this. We have had Pepper and Piper since August 2016, and their behavior in this matter has not changed. Pepper is always looking for a fight, and Piper is always willing to end that fight in some dramatic way, when she feels overmatched by her larger and stronger brother.

While we may not be able to teach cats how to be kind to each other, I do hope we can teach people. I will say, however, as I watch democrats and republicans in our nation's capital pulverize each other with their words, and then see good people right here in Grand Forks follow their lead, I am discouraged. Of course, every one of us, including myself, has opinions about important issues. I am fine with that and you should be too. The problem begins when my opinion gives me open license to say whatever I want about another person even in the most horrible, awful ways.

As Christian people, we follow a Lord who says, "if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire." Now, if this is true than every human being is going to hell. So, what is Jesus really up to here? With all my heart, I think Jesus is trying to teach us that the way we talk to each other, every sentence we say to each other, matters to him. I think Jesus is telling us to be kind to each other. I think Jesus is telling Americans to be kind to each other and work together so we can get through this coronavirus pandemic.

The eighth commandment is, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Martin Luther teaches us about this commandment by saying, "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light." In other words, we are to use our words to protect each other, even and maybe especially our enemies. Besides, if we trash talk politicians in Washington DC, we will trash talk our friends too.

Why am I on this rant? Maybe I am preaching to myself. Maybe I have seen people I am close to use their words to intentionally hurt other people's reputations. Or, maybe I am inviting you to join me in trying to use our words and actions for good and not for harm. When Martin Luther explained the fifth commandment, "You shall not murder," he said, "We are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbors in any way, but help them with all their physical needs." Luther wasn't perfect either, not even close, but he was wise about how the Lord wants us to be kind to each other.

I believe Jesus died to show us how to be together. In fact, his loving sacrifice was even for people who betrayed him, denied him, ran away from him, and hated him. His loving sacrifice was even for sinners like you and me who use our words and actions to hurt and discredit people who are far away and near. I believe Jesus died so he could be raised and say, "That's how I want the people of my world to be! I want people to care about each other. I want people to love each other. I want people to be merciful and kind to each other." There will be no peace in the world until we follow his example.

But there is hope. Two hours after Pepper and Piper were fighting in the kitchen, they were on Margo's lap, nuzzled close to each other. Somehow, peace had been restored. They were purring, grooming

each other, and happy to be brother and sister. Is this possible for people in Grand Forks, in Washington DC, or in this world? Can we be close to each other and be happy to be brothers and sisters, children of God? Will the wolf ever really live with the lamb (Isaiah 11:6)? I sure hope so! It might take the return of Christ, but I hope so. We could get started early, though. Be kind to each other!

You are in my prayers,
Pastor Tom