

Romans 8:12-17 “Love Ain’t Easy”

In the Gospel reading that Mary read this morning Jesus said, “This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.” This directive is at the heart of John’s gospel and is the highest priority in the community for which the gospel of John was written. “Love one another.” It’s supposed to be what sets Christians apart from all others. Tertullian, a second century North African scholar became a Christian because he noticed that love was their defining characteristic. He wrote, “See how these Christians love one another!”

I miss Maxine Davis. She was only with us for a few years after she found us, but I loved how every now and then she’d give a little testimony during joys and concerns. She’d start out by saying, “We’re not a friendly church.” And she’d pause for effect then say, “No, we are a *loving* church.” Meribeth Carlson was another one who’d spontaneously testify to how often she was rejected by other churches until she found a loving, welcoming community here. It feels good, doesn’t it? We feel like we’re doing something right when we receive that kind of affirmation. On the other hand, it hurts when we find out that someone leaves our fellowship because we’ve failed them. Were we not gracious enough? Were we not forgiving enough? Did we fall short in our understanding of what it means to be a loving community united in Christ? Maybe we start out by blaming ourselves when this happens. Then we move on to blaming others because, well ... that’s just our nature.

Last Sunday, we had Pentecost in the Park for the first time in two years. We celebrated how the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples enabling them to communicate across linguistic and cultural divides. We learned that the Spirit would prove us wrong about everything we thought we knew about sin and righteousness and judgement. We learned that our old ideas about insiders and outsiders and boundaries would be turned upside down. Day one in the life of the church started right on the mark didn’t it? But from day two forward the church

struggled with what it looks like to practice and live out our faith as a worshipping community.

A question that often comes up is, “How do we balance our call to *reach out* to others with our need to *nurture* each other and celebrate our shared values?” We see this in the New Testament as Christ’s followers struggled to live together in their differences. They, and we, have asked, “Should we be *outwardly* focused or *inwardly* focused?” Another issue is and has been, “Who gets to decide how we lovingly treat others both ‘in here’ and ‘out there?’” Eventually it comes down to, “Who gets to determine what the standard of behavior is?” In the earliest manifestations of the church, many congregations expected particular behaviors from their members. We touched on this when we had our Bible study on the Prison Epistles a while ago. Generally speaking, Paul had some pretty good ideas that he presented to the churches. But what we forget sometimes is that these communities of faith were very different from one another depending on their location. What Paul said to the church in Rome may not be very applicable to the church in Corinth or vice versa. As these churches grew, they developed structures to help them stay united in the things that were most important. Then “those churches” evolved into “*The Church.*” And when the church grew more influential, the powers that be started to say, “Aaaah!” Why? Because things started to feel like they were getting out of hand. So, what happens when an institution made up of flawed human beings feel like things are getting out of control? We make an effort to *take back* control. And for the church, that meant setting up a system of rewards and punishments called “Church discipline.” Pretty soon, church discipline became an instrument of control which, oddly enough, ran counter to the original priority of loving acceptance. But that’s how you maintain control. And when that happens, you cross over into the land of legalism. “But how and why does this happen?” Because it works, right? And if you want an *extra* measure of control, you use the threat of violence to keep people in line which has happened several times in the church’s history.

But what happens when the pendulum swings over from love and acceptance into the realm of legalism and control? Most of the time it swings right back over to the polar opposite side! Then the church starts saying, “Oh no, we can’t say *anything* about expectations or particular behaviors!” In other words, we go from *overreacting* to difficult behaviors to *ignoring* them and hoping they’ll go away. But they don’t. The difficult behaviors continue, and people get all bewildered and hurt, and pretty soon you’ve got a congregation that spends most of its time pouring energy into damage control when kerfuffles happen. “Oh, well that never happens here!” No. Our congregation is no different in that way than every other congregation past, present and future. We’re human after all, and *all* congregations are made up of humans. And most humans don’t like to talk about conflict or hurt or difficult behaviors. Therefore we cannot rest on our laurels and say we’re better than anyone else.

That being said, I *do* want to take an opportunity to tell you a couple of things that I *really appreciate* about *our* church ... our movement. As Disciples of Christ, we are not part of a hierarchical structure. We do not have bishops who tell us what to do or how to believe. We operate on what’s called a “covenantal” model. Here’s what this looks like for us: As a congregation here in Chico, we are part of a district with five other Disciples churches. Those churches are in a region made up of fifty-five churches who cooperate with thirty other regions who make up the general expression of the church. The general church office is in Indianapolis, and we have a General Minister and President who we elect every eight years who has absolutely no power whatsoever to tell congregations what to do. That’s because we covenant to support each other so that we can bring the Good News of Jesus “to the ends of the earth.” To be in covenant means that we have agreed on some shared commitments about the ways we live out our faith. We take opportunities to renew and re-commit this covenant when we go to our Region’s Annual Gatherings, and our General Assemblies, and yes ... every week here at the table our congregation along with all other Disciple congregations re-new our covenant to God and to one another.

The covenant is like a compass. It keeps us pointed toward our ministry objectives and what Jesus calls us to be and do. By being in covenant with each expression of the church, General, Regional and Local, we make the following commitments to show the world who we are -

Our Identity? We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us.

Our Vision? To be a faithful, growing church, that demonstrates true community, deep Christian spirituality and a passion for justice.

Our Mission? To be and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, witnessing, loving and serving from our doorsteps "to the ends of the earth."

Our Confession? *As members of the Christian Church, we confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world.*

Does some Bishop in San Ramon or Indianapolis tell us we *have* to do this? No. Is there retribution should we choose *not* to? Nope. That's not how a covenant works. We do this because 800,000 of us across the United States, Canada and around the globe came together at a General Assembly and produced these ministry objectives together with the Holy Spirit's help. I'm proud and happy to be part of a church that can come together as the first disciples did and say, "This is who we are, and this is what we do."

Now, let's not injure ourselves patting each other on the back, okay? Let's admit that not one of us is able to live out all of these commitments. We all fail. In fact, if we're honest, the Christian experience looks a lot like an old slapstick Charlie Chaplain movie. We fall down. We get up. We fall down. We get up. We fall down and so on. For us, covenant is not used as a tool to *exclude* us when we fall down

too many times, nor is it a tool to *excuse* us when we fall down too many times. If this were true, none of us would be here today! What the covenant *does* do is name what we're aiming for.

By being a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world, we aren't just trying to bring the world together "out there" but "in here" also. We want our church to be a safe and welcoming place for every person who walks in the door. That takes work and effort. It's hard to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world if we're fragmented in here. We've got to be willing to do the hard work of reconciliation in and among ourselves. By being a faithful, growing church that demonstrates true community, deep Christian spirituality and a passion for justice, we've got to be willing to demonstrate what this means with each other. We can't say we have a passion for justice if we're not able or willing to treat each other justly and fairly. If we're going to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, witnessing, loving and serving from our doorsteps "to the ends of the earth," we've got to be willing to love and serve one another. See the pattern here? If we're going to confess that Jesus is Lord and savior of the world, we need to make sure that our commitment to Jesus has priority over any commitment we make to "Caesar" or *any* "powers and principalities of the world."

Last week, we learned that whenever we are filled with the Spirit we can communicate across any and every divide. We affirmed that the Holy Spirit is love in action. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to live like Jesus. But ... we are human. And as such, none of us fully live like Jesus, pray like Jesus, or love like Jesus. With God's help, though, we commit to doing our best. When we're harsh with one another, we fall down. When we affirm one another, we get up. When we are hostile, we fall down. When we practice forgiveness, we get up. When we exclude someone, we fall down. When we make our churches safe and welcoming, we get up. And so it goes. Meanwhile let us love one another. Let us love not just when it's easy, but also when it's difficult.