

SLIDE 1. Series: Everyday Disciples

Teaching: *How to Disagree without Being Disagreeable*

Sunday October 13.2024

As I mentioned last Sunday - 33% of the ONE ANOTHERS of the Scriptures – those things we'd do for and towards one another – are related to unity within the body of Christ – the church – the family of faith – the community of believers.

That's 1/3 of the 94 ONE ANOTHERS listed in the bible!

Roughly 30 commands that focus on the church just getting along with one another!

Here's a sample...

SLIDE 2.

Be at peace with one another (Mk. 9:50).

Accept one another (Ro. 15:7).

Don't complain against one another (Jas. 4:11; 5:9).

Heart check.

SLIDE 3. How are we doing? How would you know? Would you describe yourself as a person of peace? Would someone who loves you and knows you well describe you that way? Do you readily accept people for who they are and where they're at in their journey of faith? Are you a characteristically encouraging and supportive voice or a complaining and critical voice?

Let's take a moment here – to sit quietly with those questions – and invite the Spirit of God to help us look at ourselves – to get a sense of how we're doing as it relates to these commands of the bible.

Or as King David wrote – we might pray: *Search me, God and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting* (Ps. 139:23-24).

Let us open our hearts and minds to what our Lord might say to us this morning on the subject of unity - by way of encouragement or challenge.

Be. Accept. Don't.

All verbs. Actions. 2 in the positive. 1 in the negative.

But long before action – we have told ourselves somethings about others – our thinking guiding or misguiding our behavior.

To a point where we cancel people or avoid them or judge them if they don't agree with the way we think about something!

To state the obvious: The church of Jesus Christ is full of divisions and factions and children of God who refuse to have fellowship with one another – even though we are a people who claim ONE Lord, ONE faith and ONE baptism.

We are hardly ONE church. We are many churches (maybe too many) – existing in isolation and judgment and suspicion and condemnation of one another.

Race, class, denomination, and doctrine separate the people of God.

It is – as has been said – that Sunday morning is the most segregated time of the week.

There are more than 30,000 recognized PROTESTANT denominations, and many of them reject every other denomination but their own.

We don't have to look any further for evidence of this kind of division than our own current provincial Mennonite denominations: BCMB (British Columbia Mennonite Brethren) and MCBC (Mennonite Church British Columbia).

I have now been a pastor in both denominations and while I'm not an expert on either – I am embarrassed and grieved by how leaders and lay people talk about the other denomination – with such judgment and even vitriol.

Why? Because we have adopted this idea that we need to separate from those who are different from us in appearance or status or - belief.

It goes something like this, "If you don't look like us, act like us, worship like us, or believe exactly the same things as us – we are not obligated to have fellowship with you."

Or, in our case, "If you don't know who Menno Simons is – well, all bets are off!"

Wealthy white people attend church with wealthy white people. Mennonites do fellowship with other Mennonites. People who believe the Bible is inerrant only fellowship with those who believe the same thing. People who believe homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle for a believer hang out with those who affirm same-sex relationships. Egalitarians with Egalitarians. Complementarians with Complementarians. You get the picture!

But when we aren't of the same race, class, denomination or – esp. of the same confession of faith – do we need to divide?!

Do we think this is what Jesus had in mind for his church?

And moving from macro to micro – how do I, how do you, how do we contribute to these kinds of division?

What's on our minds?

I wonder if Author and Pastor, Bryan James Smith and Theologian Stanley Hauerwas are right to say that what is on our minds when we divide over differences is FEAR.

SLIDES 4 + 5. Smith says: "Exclusion allows us the feeling that we are safe; we have kept false teachers out; we have cast out the wolves in sheep's clothing, and all is well. Insistence on doctrinal correctness is often a smoke screen that hides a deeper problem; our insecurity that all will crumble if we don't get everything right."

SLIDE 6. Hauerwas says: "Only when my self – my character – has been formed by God's love, do I know I have no reason to fear the other"

I would argue with these guys that much of the fear we have of each other – in this context - can be overcome by being curious about different races and classes and denominations, by humbly admitting and acting as if it's true: that we won't ever get everything right, and by operating from a deep and growing awareness that we are forgiven and being formed by God's love.

What DID Jesus have in mind?

A prayer that the church would be ONE.

SLIDE 7. *I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me* (Jn. 17:20-21).

Jesus prayed for his contemporaries and those who would come to believe in him in the future – for a oneness – a unity – like the unity between God-the-Father and God-the-Son.

Jesus did not believe that our differences should divide us.

He *prayed* for the opposite, in fact.

And he is the *source* of the opposite.

As Paul says, "Christ is all and in all" (Col. 3:11).

Which is to say – in context of the passage - that Christ is in the female as well as the male, in the Jew as well as the Greek (or the Gentile), even in the barbarian and Scythian!

The barbarian who did not speak Greek and were thought to be uncivilized, and the Scythians who were considered ruthless and crude and violent.

What could such a mixture of race and class and different thinking feel like to the members of the church in Colossae?

Imagine you are Jewish – taught from birth that you were chosen by God and that the Gentiles were ungodly – to then join hands with a Greek in prayer!

Or imagine you are a slaveholder – a person of the elite class – and receiving a piece of bread for Communion from a slave.

Or imagine you are a first century male raised to believe that women are inferior – and then looking across the room at a woman, who – by acumen and grace – has paid for the home you are meeting in!

What could this look like today?

Imagine a conservative sharing Communion with a liberal. Imagine someone who has a same sex partner or someone who has transitioned singing songs of hymns and praise alongside someone with a spouse and kids. Imagine a Catholic sitting in a pew beside a Protestant. Imagine the leader of BCMB standing in prayer with the leader of MCBC at a provincial prayer convention.

Our differences need not divide us. Indeed, they shouldn't.

SLIDE 8. As Paul says: ***So, we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another*** (Ro. 12:5).

Even when we disagree about things.

The church is a unified body, held together by Jesus.

We may think we are divided, but we aren't.

Let me put it this way - along with others – I believe that all denominations that affirm the basic doctrines of faith found in the creeds (the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed) comprise the church in its many forms – whether we like it or not - the foundation of the church being faith in the Creator God whose Son was born of a virgin, whose deity was attested by the miracles he performed, who died, was buried, and rose again to secure the forgiveness of sin and the restoration of humankind to the One who created them, and who will return one day to judge the living and the dead.

SLIDE 9. Paul appeals to the church that we be united in our thinking – that ***we agree with one another so that there may be no divisions*** (1 Cor. 1:10).

But - How can we agree with people who refuse to agree with us? How can we be "united in mind and thought" when we clearly do not agree on every point?

Do we let go of our ideas, opinions, or doctrines? Do we acquiesce for the sake of peace? Do we compromise our beliefs and convictions just to get along?

I don't think so.

I think the only way for us to agree with one another is to distinguish between the essentials and the nonessentials of our faith – between what we can readily agree on (like “Jesus is Lord” and like credal statements) and what are – as Paul calls them – “disputable matters” (Ro. 14:1) – or what we might call “gray areas” – those things that the bible does not spell out with clarity.

The “disputable matters” Paul refers to in Ro. 14 were which foods were acceptable to eat and the observance of certain holy days.

Some believers in the church felt free to eat all kinds of foods – without restriction – including non-kosher foods (foods prohibited by God in the OT for certain reasons) and meat that had been offered to pagan idols (also a religious no-no).

Those who were weak in the faith might have given up anything that reminded them of their pre-Christian life – including eating meat. Similarly – some Christians who had always worship God on the required Jewish holy days may have felt hollow and faithless if they didn’t continue to dedicate those days to God.

The problem was that the “strong” Christians were looking down on the “weak” ones for cramping their freedom – and the “weak” ones were condemning the “strong” ones for their lack of sensitivity.

The church was caught up in the sins of pride and selfishness and legalism and judgmentalism. Paul reminded both the “strong” and the “weak” Christian – both as servants of God - that they were accountable to **God** alone.

SLIDE 10. Paul says: ***Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls*** (before God). ***And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand*** (Ro. 14:4, ESV).

In other words – and by application – mature Christians should be sensitive to weaker brothers and sisters in Christ to keep them from stumbling or violating their conscience. And less mature believers who have strong convictions in an area must be sensitive to restricting or judging those who have discovered Christian freedom.

The lesson of Ro. 14 is still relevant for today: If Christians disagree on non-essential, disputable matters, neither side should condemn or judge the other, but both should be allowed to worship God (and be accountable to Him) as they are – as Paul says in v. 5 – “fully convinced in their mind.”

Paul goes on to say: Christians won’t be known for what they eat or drink, but for their love, righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (v. 17). Paul longed to see the believers in Rome living unselfishly and agreeing to disagree despite their differences.

The church – then – could focus on what really mattered – sharing the gospel.

SLIDE 11. Augustine has been quoted to say, **“In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity.”**

I like this. I think it makes sense.

So did the founder of Methodism, John Wesley.

The early Methodist societies consisted of people from different backgrounds and classes. Wesley quickly saw the problem of division based on class, and he solved it (kinda) by asking those who were wealthy not to dress in clothing that would set them apart from those who were poor.

Perhaps he borrowed this thought from Paul who instructed Pastor Timothy (in 1 Tim. 2:9) to exhort his congregation to dress “modestly” – which was not a moral, sexual statement of standard but one of equality.

As for division on the basis of doctrine, Wesley shared his thoughts in his famous sermon, “The Catholic (or ‘Universal’) Spirit” – that for the church to be unified – it had to learn how to distinguish between essentials and nonessentials, how to accept our differences in the nonessentials, and then decide not to let the differences overshadow our common faith.

Wesley believed that love and commitment to Jesus were essential – and that everything else was simply nonessential – and by nonessential he didn’t mean unimportant, but that those things shouldn’t divide us.

Can I enjoy fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ who aren’t Mennonite? Can I keep my friendship with a fellow believer who doesn’t think the bible is inerrant? Can I worship with someone who is affirming of same-sex relationships if I disagree with them? Can I be in a church who hires a female pastor or would I have to leave?

Let me finish by getting specific about how we might go about having disagreements without being disagreeable.

SLIDE 12. 5 tips for being an agreeable human.

1. Be curious about why people think and feel the way they do. Respect the person. Know their backstory. Be able to make their argument for them to show that you listened well. Say things like, “I can see why you feel that way” and “I can see why you would think that.”

2. Be willing to change your mind. Because none of us gets everything right – legitimately hold the possibility that you might be wrong – or at least to see the other’s argument as having some validity. Try to keep yourself from firing up the objection guy whenever you hear something you don’t agree with – discipline yourself to listen and learn.

3. Don't speak evil of the other. Focus on what you have in common – both when you are speaking to them and when you are speaking of them. Don't badmouth them behind their backs. Talk about their strengths. Talk about what unites you.

4. Pray for them. It is tough to pray for someone who you don't agree with. It is much easier to judge and cancel them and to not speak to them when they pass you by and say HELLO to you. But it is better – as a disciple of Jesus Christ – to pray for them – that God would bless them.

5. Work or play alongside of them. If at all possible – see if you can work alongside the person – either in something he or she is doing, or in some ministry in which you are engaged. Or play alongside the person – either in something they enjoy or you can invite them into. Working or playing alongside someone can create bonds of unity that overcome differences.

SLIDE 12. 2 Points 4 Peace.

1. We don't have to divide when we disagree.

2. The church is ONE because of Jesus. We don't have to work for it. We just need to walk in it.