

The Hard Work of Life Together

September 13, 2015 - Oxford Christian Church

James 3:17-18; 1 Corinthians 13:1-7

The crowds grew louder and more intense in their chants, shouting back and forth at one another. Faces were contorted in anger as they yelled at those across the way that were opposing them. It quickly became an ugly scene of us vs. them.

The person posted something on Facebook or Twitter about that one hot button topic...and the comments came flooding in. Some comments of "amen!" and "You're so right!". Others comments expressing opposition and their disbelief that anyone could be so stupid to believe such a thing. People arguing back and forth, quickly moving from discussion to personal attacks.

I don't think disagreements over issues of morality or faith or freedoms are new. In fact, the book of 1 Corinthians that Frank read from today was a letter written in part to address some controversies and disagreements in the church at Corinth almost 2,000 years ago. But it seems that the culture in which we live- and to which we as people of faith contribute- continues to become

more and more toxic, increasingly filled with venom and increasingly void of respect and compassion. We see it in news outlets of all political stripes, on social media, and in personal conversations. We see it in ourselves in the ways we're tempted to respond to those who have different convictions, interpretations, and views than we do.

This morning the lectionary text from James can be a good starting place for us to consider how we as people of faith in particular respond to those with whom we may not agree. What kind of postures do we take towards those who think or act differently than we do? What do we do when we even disagree with other Christians?

One of the things I appreciate about our denomination is what we hold to and seek to practice about freedom in our beliefs. If you'll look on the back of your bulletin, you'll find something that is on there every week, though you might not pay it too much attention after a while. Among the list of what Disciples believe, we find this under "Freedom of Belief":

"As Disciples, we are called together around the two essentials of faith: a belief in Jesus Christ as Lord & Savior and that Christians are free to follow their conscience guided by the Bible, the Holy Spirit, study, prayer, and are expected to extend that freedom to others."

We believe each Christian has the freedom and space to formulate their own views, shaped by all the things we just read. All this is done personally, but also in community- in the context of being part of a group of other people seeking to formulate their views as well. And I would add that it isn't just a *freedom* we have to formulate our own views, it's a *responsibility*.

So as Disciples, we believe and seek to practice that each person formulates their own views of faith and life in the context of all these things working together. There's no denominational figure or committee or church board or even a pastor telling you, "This is what you must believe on each these issues in order to belong."

This can be a beautiful thing as we respect and honor this process in one another's life and in our life together.

But this can be hard too. Because Disciples- and Christians in general- aren't always going to see eye to eye on issues. Just in the past couple of months, I have personally seen examples of Christians disagreeing on issues including immigration, marriage equality, racism in our structures and private lives, the separation of church & state, and approaches to dealing with violence. Christians of all stripes and kinds have disagreed on these issues at national gatherings, in conversations on social media, in public protests from Charleston to Ferguson to Rowan County and in face to face conversations. The reality is that even here within this sanctuary, there is a diversity of views on all of these topics (and more!) among even the followers of Jesus gathered here.

So how do we live as people following in the way of Jesus in a world where we encounter such disagreement? How do we live when we disagree with even our fellow followers of Jesus?

There are some ways that we can chose to react. We may choose to retreat- to close ourselves off from any views or lifestyles that contradict our own...and any people who have them. We may choose to insist all others believe and practice as we do. We may

chose to argue constantly, believing that if we make our case loud and long enough everyone else will come to see things our way.

We may choose to fear those who believe differently, viewing them as a threat. We may choose to resort to labels and stereotypes of others, thinking we know all there is to know about them and dehumanizing them in the process. Maybe you've reacted in some of these ways at times. I know I have.

The scriptures that Frank read for us this morning seem to offer us better ways. You can find the verses from James 3:17-18 on the front cover of your bulletin. The Message paraphrase of verse 18 reads this way: "You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results *only* if you do the hard work of getting along with each other,"

Did you catch that? The *hard work* of getting along with each other. There is a better way of life together, even with those with whom we differ and disagree at some times and on some issues. But it's not easy. This better way is hard work. Today's scriptures give us some insight into what's essential in this hard work.

James 3:17 tells us that God's type of wisdom is peaceful, gentle, and overflowing with mercy. It's fair and genuine. It's lived out by treating others "with dignity and honor".

It may be easier to act this way towards those like us...those with whom we agree. But how does this match up with the attitudes and actions I have toward those who believe or act differently than I do?

What might our lives look like if we were to be people who were peaceful, gentle, and overflowing with mercy? What does it look like to treat others- even those with whom we disagree- with "dignity and honor"? With these things in mind, what postures might I take toward all those around me?

I might remember that not everyone has to agree with me on everything or believe exactly as I do. I might come to terms with the reality that there will likely never be a time in this world where everything aligns with all my views...and that's not necessarily a bad thing either. When I'm able to let go of some self-imposed

responsibility to get others to see everything exactly the way I do, I'm able to treat them in much more gentle and peaceful way.

It might mean that I would seek to be open to learning from others, even those with whom I disagree. I might see the value in other perspectives and those who hold them- that they can help call out my blind spots and bring out questions I might ignore on my own. I'd remember that we need one another, so I can't close myself off from others- even those with whom I disagree.

It might mean that I would always hold my own beliefs in tension with the reality that I might be at least partially wrong about some things.

Treating others "with dignity and honor" means we refuse to see them as anything less than the valuable children of God that they are, even when we disagree with them. Over the past couple of weeks, the events in Rowan County have seemed to bring out the worst in some people...even Christians. I've seen examples of those Christians who favor marriage equality (or at least disagree with actions of Kim Davis) resort to making fun of her for her hair and

clothing, calling her names, devaluing her as a person. I've seen examples of those Christians who oppose marriage equality using slurs when referring to gays & lesbians or making other statements that dehumanize these people who are children of God too.

Christians on all sides of this particular issue seem to have fallen far short of treating others with dignity and honor.

It's hard to talk about these things, isn't it? To own up to the reality we see on all sides of the spectrum on any given issue...to the reality we see in us. Because this isn't just a conservative problem or moderate problem or a liberal problem. It isn't confined to any one political party or group of people. In fact, this problem is often made worse by the labels we want to place on one another, which often become ways to dismiss those with whom we disagree.

I have to own up to the ways this problem is at work in my own life. The ways I want to dehumanize and dismiss those who think or act differently than I do. The many ways I want to see them as anything less than the complex people they are. People with hopes and dreams and fears and people they love and struggles they carry. People who are valuable and loved children of God.

We are all created in God's image. We all have value, even those we don't agree with. Kim Davis and all the couples trying to get marriage licenses. The politician you voted for and the one you think is full of nonsense. The person with the same bumper stickers as you and the person sharing the articles and memes from the internet that make you angry. And that's hard, isn't it?

How do we get along with those we disagree with? Maybe we start by reminding ourselves that God loves and values them as much as God loves and values us. And that even when we disagree, we can choose to value that *person* more than the things about which we disagree.

Our second scripture for today is one we probably most often hear read at weddings, but the reality is that the context for it in 1 Corinthians is actually talking about the love all followers of Jesus are to have for others.

Paul says, "Look, I may be able to say the most beautiful spiritual words you've heard, but if I don't have love, it's all just noise. I can

have all this knowledge of spiritual things and even have mountain-moving faith, but if I don't have love, I'm nothing. I can give away everything I have and even sacrifice my very body and livelihood, but if I don't have love, it's pointless."

Even if we have the "right" view on anything, if we leave out love, we've missed the point. If our view on any issue or of any person makes us more arrogant or cruel, then we've missed the point. We should never be so focused on being *right* that we forget to be *loving* as well. We should never be so focused on "winning" an argument that we lose by failing to be gentle and overflowing with mercy. No matter what our view, no matter what issue, no matter how much we disagree with the other person...we cannot leave love behind.

And Paul is clear- love isn't just this abstract word we throw around. Love is lived out in how we treat others. "⁴ Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, ⁵ it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, ⁶ it isn't happy with injustice,

but it is happy with the truth. ⁷ Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things."

We show this love to those we disagree with, even when they don't return the favor. We seek to be people of gentleness and mercy, even when others aren't. We seek to treat others with dignity and respect, even when they don't do the same.

These scriptures today from James and 1 Corinthians show us a better way to life together, especially life together when we disagree. And this is hard work. It's not easy.

And don't misunderstand- all this talk of gentleness and love doesn't mean you have to just throw out any views and convictions you have. As we pointed out earlier, one of our beliefs and practices as Disciples is that we allow and even encourage each person to have the freedom and responsibility to formulate their own views through Scripture, community, prayer, and the work of the Spirit. But we also expect that we will extend that same freedom to others.

And in the midst of it all, no matter our view, no matter the issue, no matter the people involved- as followers of Jesus, we are to be people whose lives are marked with gentleness and mercy. We're to be people who treat others with dignity and respect- even those with whom we disagree. We're to be people who love.

And this is hard work. There's probably been at least something in this sermon that made you uncomfortable. That's ok- that's true for me too. This is hard work, this life together in the church and life together with those outside these walls too.

Thomas Campbell was one of the founders of our denomination. He would often quote a saying he had adapted from other sources:

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, love.”

We may at times not even agree on what is "essential" and what is "nonessential"...but in all things, may we love. Not some abstract love, but a love that looks like gentleness, patience, seeking to understand, showing mercy, and treating others with dignity and respect.

In the midst of all the events in Rowan County over the past couple of weeks, there was a bit of story that was easy to miss, but was included at the bottom of one Associated Press article. It read: "Rachelle Bombe has sat there every day, wearing rainbow colors and carrying signs that demand marriage equality. One particularly hot day, Kim Davis, the woman she was there to protest against, worried Bombe would get overheated and offered her a cold drink. In turn, Bombe said she's checked in on Davis, whose lawyer says she's received death threats and hate mail, to make sure she's holding up despite the difficult circumstances."

Some of us may not agree with Rachelle Bombe's views. Some of us may not agree with Kim Davis' views. But maybe this small story, these quiet actions, can help us remember the humanity of both of them. That these aren't just "issues"- they are *people*. And maybe this encounter can give us hope for a better way, even in the midst of our disagreements.

Let's do the hard work of life together and find that our lives, our church, this world- that they are all better places as a result. Amen.