

Love and Unity in the Real World

Core Values #4 “Discipline”

**Scripture: Luke 6:37-42,
Matthew 18:15-20**

**Modesto CRC
August 8, 2010**

A few weeks ago we began a series of messages about **our core values** as Christians and as a church. These are the unchanging priorities, the permanent God-given principles that govern our thinking, our decision-making and our behavior.

We need this direction. True to my gender, I hate to stop and ask for directions. But as I get older, I'm softening a bit and realizing that going faster in the wrong direction is never helpful. It is so important that we keep looking at God's map and applying that to our situation. Going faster and getting busier in the wrong direction will not be productive.

You're probably familiar with the scene in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in which Alice is wandering around, trying to find a way out of Wonderland. She comes to a fork in the road and meets the Cheshire Cat. (not related to anyone here) Alice asked the cat, *“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”*

That depends a good deal on where you want to get to, replies the cat.

I don't much care... says Alice.

I love the cat's response, *Then it doesn't matter which way you go.*”

It reminds me of so many churches that have not seriously looked at where God is calling them to go.

We have talked about 3 core values: 1) Unity in Christ's Church, 2) Love of another kind, and from that love the marriage of Worship and Justice. We are going to consider 7 in all. This morning I would like to try to put UNITY and LOVE OF ANOTHER KIND together in something we might call **discipline**.

I can well imagine someone listening to what we have been saying, and thinking, *“It sounds right. It sounds good. But it just does not work that way. People are often not that easy to love. People hurt each other, offend each other, argue with each other, and stumble over each other's sins and weaknesses. It is not easy to respect and value persons, demonstrating compassion, mercy and the forgiving nature of God.”* I would agree with the observation. It is not easy. It demands spiritual growth, maturity, and transformation within us.

We have been careful to point out that the **basis** of our core values – **the foundation of our unity is in God, not in us and certainly not because we are all the same or think the same**; 2nd, the ground of our love is in the love we have received by the grace of God. The values we cherish and strive for are based in Christ, **not in our perfection**. God gives unity and love as we are ready to receive it, and pass it on. **Honesty demands that we are clear about ourselves.** **Our conversion to Christ is the beginning of a growth process, not its end.** We are never done going to God's school.

Spiritual maturing, growing in Christ, happens in the testing and many failures of Christian living. It is like **learning to walk**, we fall down a lot. Then the problem is not that Christians fail; it is that they think failure should never happen and so are not honest about it. If we never fail, it means we are not doing anything. The only lasting shame in failure is denial and not learning from it. The only shame is hypocrisy that whitewashes failures so we are not transparent, so we cannot learn together.

So how do we deal with the reality that we are people who are growing up in Christ – at whatever age we are today? We **fail**. We **hurt** each other. We are **often less than respectful and caring**. We **offend** each other. We **disappoint** and **anger** each other. The question is NOT: how do we make ourselves look pious and superior in our sanctification? **The question is how can we be honest, in touch with reality, and be Christian?** How do we get rid of the prideful hypocrisy, the pious games, the self-glorifying superior attitudes, and **act out the love and unity of God?** **How do we tell the truth and honor God?**

Knowing how self-focused we really are, knowing how insecure we are, and how often we put other people down to make ourselves feel better, **Jesus gets very specific about how to deal with each other** in the human reality of conflict, of different ways of seeing things, of the sins we have not conquered that hurt and offend others. **He gives us a prescription – a series of steps to follow.**

As a person of faith who affirms the core values of spiritual growth, unity, and love, **what do I do when I get into conflict with a brother or sister in Christ?** What do I do when I see another's destructive sins? What do I do when someone hurts me or tramples on my dignity? Or says something untrue about me? **WHO DO I TALK TO?**

What is the first thing we **want to do**? Punish? Get revenge? Tell other people how awful that person is? Get other people sympathetically on our side? Lash out in anger? All of those things? **WHAT ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO if we take Jesus seriously.**

Step 1: Jesus says, is to withhold judgment and talk to God in introspective prayer. Jesus said, in Luke 6 (which we read) essentially this: ***“Be careful! I know how you work. You want to make judgments all over the place so you can create a monster in your mind to justify your own feelings and attitudes. On this one thing you want to conclude this is a BAD PERSON!”*** It is so easy to apply all the stereotypes and use all sorts of polarizing words. The Lord wants us to stop and pray before anything else. Luke 6:36 says, ***“Be merciful just as your Father in heaven is merciful.”*** **It is so important Jesus does something he does not do very often, he threatens us! *If you judge someone, just label them; just write them off without dealing with it, God will judge you in the same way! We need to think long and hard about that.*** There is no indication here that he is exaggerating. Luke 6:39, ***“For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”*** Think for a moment. Do you think it is possible that we are unhealthy spiritually because of our judgments on others?

In the past we have called the prescription we are talking about **“church discipline,”** but that is really the wrong term, it is **Christian discipline**, first of all **Christians disciplining themselves**. This is about us. I know, when we listen to sermons like this we sit here and hope that so and so is listening. It is about us! **“Stop,” says Jesus, “and first talk with God, looking inside to make sure that the real problem is not within us.”** Make sure we are not the one who is blinded by guilt, a fault, or overly sensitive due to a sin we are covering up. Make sure there is no log in our own spiritual eye while we are trying to remove the splinter from someone else. Before we do anything, **pray Psalm 139: “Search me, O 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.”**

How often have we seen some rigid, judgmental, unloving person attempt to correct the faults of someone else? And what is the result? Is it unity and love in Christ’s church? Is it true Christian discipline? **Jesus gave us a prescription. First, stop and pray, judging self before others.**

If we listen carefully to the Lord, **this self-discipline is not optional**, it is the commitment to apply our core values, the commitment of every Christian.

Interestingly, it is first of all the discipline of the accuser. It is us disciplining ourselves. Of course, the wonder of this is that when we are faithful to it we learn so much about ourselves and about love and unity. And sometimes it all stops here.

Step 2, if necessary, in the Lord's prescription is to **talk to no one except the person with whom we have a problem.** One of the most enjoyable victories the Evil One has is when Christians gossip about each other – refusing to obey their Lord at this point. I have seen it destroy people, demoralize them spiritually, push people away from the gospel and the good news of the love of God. I have seen it rip churches apart, destroy ministries, and attack the credibility of the gospel for hundreds of people.

How do we deal with the reality of conflict, failure, and sin in Christ's church? That is really the question. **First**, Jesus says, examine yourself. **Second**, approach the other person in love, still listening. It is possible we have misunderstood or misinterpreted. Our attitude must be that of a fellow traveler on this road of Christian growth, a fellow sinner forgiven by grace. **The goal is reconciliation with our brother or sister in Christ. The goal is to forgive as we have been forgiven. The goal is truth in love.** If we find ourselves with another motive – revenge perhaps, or wanting to see the other person squirm, self-justification maybe, then it is clear that we have not done our homework in step 1. If Christians have integrity with these first 2 steps 90% or more of all conflicts in the church would not only disappear, but we would find ourselves helping people with whom we felt conflict and feeling the joy of love and unity. And heaven rejoices. **Jesus' prescription: 1) stop and pray before we judge, 2) tell no one except the person with whom we have a problem.** Don't you think that would work great in our marriages and families too?

Step 3, if necessary, is to take another witness or two with us to talk again. Notice, in this whole process, there are still only a couple people who know about the problem. The role of the witness is to be one who observes, listens to both sides, and encourages reconciliation.

I wonder how much gossip would be squelched, how much conflict would be ended, how many sins would be avoided if we made an agreement today. What if we decided to respond to anyone's negative comments about someone else by asking:

Have you talked to God and that person about what you are saying? If not, I do not want to hear it. It ought to be the rule of every Council meeting, every committee meeting, every coffee gathering, every conversation we have. **Before the Lord, can we make such an agreement this morning?** Our words are so powerful; will we be accountable for them? Will we make reconciliation in God's love and unity our goal?

Step 4, if necessary, is to take the sin or conflict to the elders and eventually to the church. This is a last resort in a serious offense. Too often this is what people want to do first, after they talk to 20 others. **The goal is always reconciliation** – even if the person has separated themselves or been separated from the church. All of this is so crucial if we are going to love each other in the reality of our spiritual pilgrimage. We need to love each other enough to care, to correct, and to have accountability with our commitments. It is also critical to the integrity of the church. If there is no accountability, then there is no discipline, and no true church. Jesus made the point by giving us an awesome responsibility: ***“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosened in heaven.”*** Our willingness to love has eternal consequences for us and the people we love. **Without careful integrity in this process the sin of the church can quickly become greater than what is being corrected.** And it all takes time and patience.

After some debate with myself, I'll ask your indulgence in sharing a personal illustration that I hope makes the point. Personal illustrations are always dangerous.... I stood at the head of her casket in the funeral home on Eastern Ave. in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She died as the result of a blow to the head with a liquor bottle. It was in all the papers and on TV back there in 1980. She was dumped out of a car at the emergency room entrance to Butterworth Hospital by her companion. We never did find out if they were really married as they said.

As I stood there by the casket two men I greatly respected walked up, *“Al, we are sorry.”* Long pause. *“We knew there was a problem already when you were a teenager, but we didn't know what to do. We are sorry.”* They were elders in the church we attended as I was growing up, men I deeply valued. My early teenage years were the days of the family secrets: mother had a problem. The reasons for it, as I learned much later, were horrible in themselves, and she could not deal with them. She drank. We knew, of course, but we were frightened and ashamed, and we wondered if

somehow it was our fault. We thought no one else knew. We went to church, usually twice on Sunday. Catechism, Christian School, and Young People's society were all important parts of my life. We thought no one knew the secrets. Looking back, there were some strange reactions when I was elected president of the Young People's Society. Only later did I understand, when people objected to my teaching catechism when I was a seminary student. When I was asked to preach for the first time, as a son of the congregation, many people did not come. They didn't want to hear God's Word from the son of flawed family.

We kept our secret, we thought, and it was a frightening, lonely secret in those days of high school and college. But everyone knew, and gossiped endlessly while we experienced the fear, the anxiety of the loneliness, the hope always followed by deadly, repetitive disappointments.

I stood there by the casket and thanked my favorite elders for coming, now a pastor of a church myself, and added, *"I wish I knew you knew. I don't know if we could have helped her or not – maybe, if it were no longer a secret – but you could have helped me. I would not have been so alone."*

You see, for our family, the church did not work. It was not a safe place of love and unity. Being optimistic, **I always believed it could work, believed it should work.** I have to say though, that at that time the best we got was being the object of gossip and occasionally the condescension of its judgments. My sister and I grew up with all the right Christian Reformed credentials, yet believing in our hearts the silent message: **children of an alcoholic and a truck driver – what good can come from that?** The church, the core values, the baptismal vows, the grace of its message, **the church did not work.** I guess there were no Christians who took seriously the loving discipline that Jesus expects of his church. I guess everyone thought that was someone else's job. **You see, discipline is not about kicking people out, it is about being there, loving there, and keeping people in.**

God has used these pieces of my life in powerful ways. **I still believe the church can work, should work.** These experiences perhaps have caused me to see it all with a little more compassion. I share it now only to emphasize the need I feel for all of us here to covenant together to obey our Lord, and make it work here with the core

values of love, unity and the discipline of love and unity. The Church of my youth didn't work for us. Does Modesto Christian Reformed Church work? Do we have the courage to ask the question? Can we promise the Lord to be a disciplined Christian? Will you join me in doing that?

Jesus' prescription is:

(1st introspective, self-examining prayer; 2nd approaching a person to be reconciled, talking only to them; 3rd try reconciliation again with a witness; finally, if necessary, go to the church.) The failure to follow this has caused immeasurable pain.

Moment of silence for each of us to talk with the Lord now.

We note that communion and community both have the idea of unity in them. We now come to be in unity with each other and the Lord – affirming our commitment to be faithful to Jesus' prescription. Let us come together now to the Lord's table.