

Finally
A Sermon Delivered
at
Plymouth Congregational Church
on
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by
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2 Corinthians 13: 11 – 13

I was standing on the side line of a youth soccer match a few years ago while I watched two overly invested dads in a shouting match over the application of a particular rule.

The ref joined the discussion and that just seemed to heighten the tension. The head ref then jogged across the field and joined the group. He listened for a few moments and then quietly raised his hand.

“Friends,” he said, “can we at least agree that at the end of the day we all want this to be a good experience for these kids?”

The two coaches looked incredulous and resumed shouting.

Undaunted, the head ref raised his hand again and continued, “and can we at least agree that the only way that’s going to happen is if we keep that goal at the top of our priority list?”

The passions were running a little too high for logic to triumph and so for a third time the head ref raised his hand.

“I want you to know that the kids are at the top of my list and because of that this game will not continue unless you two shake hands, and agree to play the rest of the game with the remarkable maturity level of those 6th graders out there who are patiently waiting for us to shut up and play soccer.”

That got the coaches attention.

You don’t have to agree on the rule in question but you do have to agree about why we are here or there will be no match at all.

That’s what Paul meant when he said “Finally, ... put things in order ... listen ... and agree to live with one another in peace.”

The closest I can come to Paul’s meaning of “finally” is the contemporary expression “at the end of the day.”

When all the trivialities are stripped away, what matters?

Paul was not expressing this desire in just a theoretical way. Corinth was a mess. We don't know all the details but we do know enough to say with certainty that the Corinthian church was on the verge of falling apart.

You remember that Corinth in Paul's day was a Greek city in geography only. In 44 BCE the Romans had taken over the ancient city located on the narrow isthmus that ran between Athens and Sparta. At the time of the writing of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians the old city lay 100 years dead. The new Corinth was an Imperial Colony. It was a trading and mercantile center that was rich and cosmopolitan and more than a little "loose" around the edges. According to the more elitist Greeks who lived in Athens Corinth was a place where, if anyone could come up with the name of another Goddess, some rich Corinthian would build her a temple.

Paul had been there and established a church. It was a church made up of rich and poor, Jew and Greek and Roman.

The problem was that without Paul's presence the congregation had fallen into division and schism. They could not agree on issues of polity and practice and the shouting match seemed to have degenerated to the point that the very continuing existence of the Corinthian church was in question.

Paul's letter was not unlike the head ref's comments at that long ago soccer match. Folks, at the end of the day, if you can't finally agree on what's important then you will cease to exist all together. The game's over.

How many churches have fallen on that sword over the centuries?

How many families are ripping themselves to shreds with precisely that same pathological myopia?

Friends—before it's too late—agree at least to listen to God and to one another.

Agree that together the highest calling of the church of Jesus Christ is to be that covenant assembly that can rightly be seen as Christ's body in the service of creation.

What might such an agreement look like?

Well, at the end of the day it would look like a group of people who actually listen to one another. Who agree that getting the important things right is too important to risk because of some honest difference of opinion in secondary interpretation.

Think of the coaches. The kids matter more than the egos of the coaches. The well-being of the precious children God has given to us is more important than the score of an afternoon youth soccer game.

Baptizing Devin Clark is more important than any of the dozens of legitimate issues that our Church Council will ponder next Tuesday at their meeting.

Now—not wishing to sound naïve—I believe with all my soul that the reason for the health of this congregation is because we work so very hard remembering what comes first.

Devin comes first and together we believe that the sacrament of blessing symbolized in our liturgy of baptism is pretty close to the very essence of why we are here.

As the United Church of Christ we only believe in two sacraments and we are celebrating both of them this morning.

First Baptism.

Second The Lord's Supper.

Finally, brothers and sisters ... put things in order ... agree with one another *about those things that are holy and right and central.*

Agree not about all the applications but agree as to who we are and whose we are.

And what is the pay off for such agreement?

Why is the hard work of finding a common faithful shared foundation so critical?

That's easy. Only in such a humble and risk-taking act of faith are we open enough to appreciate the God who is right here in the midst of us.

Paul said it clearly, "... live in Peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you."

It's important that we remember that the Hebrew word for peace, "Shalom" doesn't mean peace in the sense of the numbing absence of passion. The opposite actually!

God's gift of peace is the gift of being well, and whole and completely engaged as God's hands in the service of creation.

We are called to be a people of active peace.

Finally we can agree about that. How we get there and exactly what that peace looks like we can debate forever, but that we are called to Shalom is not in question.

Today we have brought that Shalom and poured it over the life and family of Devin Clark. That is important and it's why we are here.

Now we have prepared this table as a vehicle through which we can share the love, justice and hope of Jesus Christ with all who would taste of that feast, all, even people with whom we differ on everything from our polity to our politics. Because, by the grace of God, we are finally at that place where we know what matters and ultimately what does not.

“Shalom ...

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

Amen