

United Despite Differences

A sermon by Matt Matthews

Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
September 6, 2020

There is a game I often play with youth groups whereby we all stand up in an empty room and use our bodies to vote for things we care about. I'll ask questions like, what do you like best for dinner, pizza or meat loaf? The pizza people go stand on one side of the room, the meat loaf people stand on the other. The pizza side is usually more crowded. You get the idea. If you like both pizza and meatloaf, you stand in the center. It's a fun game. And I ask lots of questions: *broccoli or spinach? dinner and movie/dinner and bowling? Rolling Stones/Beatles (they say, "Who?"). Cubs/St. Louis?*

There's no right or wrong answer, only different answers.

I learned this exercise from an old Alban Institute consultant named Roy Oswald. He used it with leaders in the church to talk about the difficulty of managing conflict.

Sometimes the conflict that divides us can be resolved. Sometimes it can only be managed.

I am protestant/catholic
republican/democrat
pipe organs in worship/electric guitars in worship
gun control/no gun control

In real life, these polarities (or differences) are no game. And during this election year, we find ourselves substantially divided. In most families, sometimes you'll stand far on one side, and somebody you love will stand far, far on the other side.

Some conflict can be solved: Okay, we'll open presents on Christmas Eve instead of Christmas Day. Okay, tonight we'll have meatloaf. Tomorrow night we'll have pizza.

And some conflict can only be managed: I'll always squeeze the toothpaste tube from the middle, and you'll always squeeze the toothpaste tube from the bottom. I like grits, you never will. I say niither, you say neether.

Rachel and I have been watching The West Wing television show on Netflix. We did not watch the show for its seven seasons beginning in 1999. In Season Two, Episode Four, Ainsley Hayes (Emily Proctor) is a hot-shot republican commentator. President Josiah Bartlett (Martin Sheen) watches Ainsley on a news show and is impressed. He orders his chief of staff Leo McGarry (John Spenser), to hire her. Why, sir? She's a republican and she hates you? Why? Because she's smart, and "I like to have smart people who disagree with me around." Ainsley is hired to work as an attorney in the West Wing. And it's fascinating to watch how these two polarized groups of people can come together to work for the good of the country.

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Most congregations have members and friends who represent many, many points of. Ask around. Our church has members and friends who care about scripture and try to be attentive to God's Spirit and arrive at *very, seemingly diametrically, different conclusions* about things from their peers.

This illustrates that we are not the same.

The Gospel writer Matthew knew differences of opinion would create conflict, and conflict would create argument, and argument would create opportunities for sin. That's why he spells out what to do in the case that conflict gets out of hand. If someone sins against you . . . talk it out one-on-one. Then bring a few witnesses to talk it through. If that doesn't work, call the church together. (We're set up to do that by way of the Session.)

Paul said, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another. For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." Here's what David Bartlett says about the law:

"One reason law could be a burden in the first century, as in the twenty-first, is that law can multiply into laws—almost endlessly . . . [W]e can spend all day counting the ways our behavior might go wrong. In secular law something as relatively short as the U.S. Constitution gets interpreted and reinterpreted with reams of laws and reams of decisions on the meanings of the law.

"Paul reverses the process: . . . the law is condensed from its extended permutation to something quite solid, palpable, and near. See that neighbor? Love that person as you love yourself." (p. 41 Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4)

When we are truly the church, the church is not able to hate.

That's one reason we can agree to disagree. And we can disagree without being disagreeable *certainly not* because we have unity of opinion, but because we find our unity in God. God has first loved us and has laid down the law: that we should love one another as we love ourselves. (Notice that we are NOT commanded to agree with one another, or to like one another, only to LOVE one another.) God has decided to call us God's own—and so we are. That means we can and should live together as brothers and sisters, regardless of our divergent points of view.

Shall we call off church because we can't agree on every issue? Shall we cancel church, form separate denominations, gather in only like-minded groups?

Of course not.

Jesus lived and died that we should love God and love neighbor as we love ourselves. Let's keep loving each other and the world in the manner of Jesus Christ who took the loaf and said, "Take, eat. This is my body broken for you." And he held up the cup and said, "This is the cup of the new covenant/law, sealed in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of your sins."

The New Covenant, Jesus said. The New Law.

It's the law of love. And it is that love that makes us ONE.

AMEN.