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### The Discipline of Community

1 John 3:16-24      *And this is [God's] commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he commanded us.*

1 Corinthians 12:4-7      *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

*Participate regularly each week in corporate worship, usually the worship of this church.*

*Endeavor in every relationship to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness.*

*Indicate to the community or some member of it any difficulty I may be having with any area of our Covenant, and will seek the counsel, prayers, and support of the church.*

*(from "Our Covenant One with Another")*

It may sound strange to speak of the "discipline of community." We long for community with other people. But community doesn't just happen. Living in community is perhaps the greatest challenge of our lives. In order to find true community, we are called by Christ to follow him in the way of dying and rising. The self that insists on its own way, that wants others to be a mirror of itself, must die so that a new and truer self may be born. This new self is able to receive love and to give love, is able to know others in their real humanity and be known by them in the same way. True community is rooted in God's unconditional love that seeks to make us new people.

The core of this new community is Jesus' call to lay down our lives for others. The writer of 1 John echoes Jesus' teachings: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." Then he writes: "And this is God's commandment, that we should believe in the name of God's Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he commanded us." True community involves the transcending of the self so that a new self can emerge, the self that is able to live in love with others.

Living in this kind of community is hard work! It calls each of us to be on an honest, deep inward journey, as we face our resistances and our desires to dominate, control, or "fix" others. We face the fears and insecurities that give rise in us to jealousy, suspiciousness, or competition. But this difficult journey is also the birthing of the new self that is able to listen deeply to others, to understand them, and to encourage their uniqueness. This is the daily laying down of our lives as we commit ourselves to the spiritual journey of true community. It is, as Jesus taught, the losing of the old self in order to find our true self. Life in community is how this new self emerges.

When we commit ourselves to the discipline of community we must give up the illusion that somewhere there is a perfect community. In that community, we believe,

everyone will be nice and gentle all the time. There will be no tensions or struggles. No one will disappoint us. There will be no strange persons who make us uneasy and everybody will be pretty much like us! If we can just find that perfect community, all will be well. This illusion also is part of our desire to control and have community on our own terms.

The commitment to the discipline of community enables us to enter a real community of real people and discover the real love of God. There comes a time when we need to finally say, "This is my community. These are the people I will learn to care about, understand, forgive, and encourage. This is the community I choose in which to finally learn how to really love."

In "Our Covenant One with Another," the discipline of community is found specifically in three of the commitments: the commitment to worship regularly with our community of faith; the commitment to strive in every relationship to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness; and the seeking of help and support from others if we are having difficulty with any area of our commitment.

Worship is fundamental. Worship is the rooting our life together in God. We are placing ourselves together beneath God's living Word. We are opening ourselves as a community to receive the Holy Spirit that quickens in us Christ's life. We are not here to impress, please, or place demands on each other. We are here in our common need for and desire to live from God's love given us in Christ. In worship we experience our unity, which is found in our common belonging to God, our creator and redeemer, whose love for each of us is unshakable and eternal.

Worship is like our making a circle around a campfire. As we draw closer to the fire, to receive its light and warmth, we at the same time draw closer to one another. When we worship together, whether here in this chapel or in our mission or ministry groups, our love for one another draws its true nature, its light and warmth, from the love that flows to us from God through Christ.

Worship is not an optional activity for us as a Christian community. We don't come to worship because we "feel" like it. We come because we know our need to be with our community in God's presence. Yet worship need not feel like an obligation. We can grow to the point where look forward to gathering for worship with one another, to drink together from the waters of life. In the work of worship we touch the deepest foundation of our lives and our community, and are remade each time we worship into the Body of Christ.

Through the discipline of community we discover who we really are and what we are meant to do with our lives. Through God's spirit, we discover our giftedness and our calling. We can't do that when we're off by ourselves. We only know our true self in community, as we interact with others and grow more deeply into our life together. It is in community that I begin to understand what it is that I have to give in the service of life. And in community I learn to perceive others' gifts and sense what might be their calling.

Elaine Marie Prevallet interprets the traditional vow of obedience in her community of the Sisters of Loretto as "cooperation" and "niche." In community we learn the secret of life, that the whole creation lives only by cooperation, not by competition and domination. We also learn that each member of the earth community has its "niche," its unique and necessary participation in the whole process of life. The Apostle Paul talked about this as the diversity of gifts given us by God's spirit. Each one

has its special function and place, and all work together for the common good. Christian life is about being a body, a spiritual organism.

Each of us needs to know his or her gift, or gifts. And each of us needs to be living out of the specific call of Christ in his or her own depths. When the gift and the call come together, something exciting, energizing, and life-giving results. This is “finding our niche.” It is so important that we be about this communal work of helping one another discover our gifts and callings. We also need to hold each other accountable for them. This gets into what we call “accountability.”

We are so used to the notion of individual freedom that the notion of being held accountable for our spiritual lives sounds shocking. But real, deep spiritual growth does not happen without helping each other “keep our hands on the plough.” Accountability is not policing each other. Accountability is asking for and receiving help when we get stuck, when we’re having a hard time with our disciplines of prayer, or financial stewardship, or loving relationships, or mission. We don’t have to go it alone. Through the listening heart of another we can speak about our struggles or feelings of getting nowhere. In the understanding, solidarity, and the advice or encouragement of another, we experience God’s spirit renewing our efforts, giving us insights, and opening up the way again.

The Church of the Covenant strives to be a community of commitment and discipline, in which persons grow in the fullness of Christian and human life. We give one another strength, encouragement, and hope when we are each working with the spiritual disciplines. This does not mean that we all are succeeding splendidly at them! We all struggle. We all experience flat places and valleys. We all get stuck. We all wander into deserts, losing our way. And yet, when we know that we are in community with others who are working at the inward journey of prayer and outward journey of loving service to others, we find encouragement and happiness along the way.

Some years ago I took up swimming as my regular exercise. I learned to swim as youngster, but it was more like flailing my arms and just keeping afloat. When I decided to really learn, I often swam with a friend who had been a competitive swimmer in college. I learned by watching and by simply being in the lane next to someone who was working at it the same as I. It is amazing how we can progress in something when we are with others who are working at the same task. It is a community of practice, of discipline.

There is a Zen Buddhist story that I love. A father and daughter acrobatic team traveled from village to village performing for the people. The father would place a bamboo pole on his forehead and his little daughter would climb to the top, balancing there. This was the source of their income and they had learned to work well together. Before one performance, the father, suddenly feeling concern for his daughter’s well-being, said, “Daughter, we must take care of each other today so that all will go well for us.” The daughter said, however, “Father, that is not the way it is. We must each take care of ourselves so that all will go well.”

To grow in our life of faith we need a community in which we practice together Christ’s love not only for ourselves and for each other but also for the whole creation. Being in such a community is hard work, asking us to lay down our lives for others. But such a community is also the garden in which we rise up and flower as our true selves, as God created us to be.