

January 29, 2012 / Season after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

A Safe, Loving, and Redemptive Community

Last week we distributed copies of our new Safe Church and Child Protection Policies, approved by the Covenant Members at their December meeting. We will have an opportunity at lunch to talk about the details of the policies so that we understand them and can work with them as fully as possible.

I would like now, however, to talk briefly about these policies in the context of who we are as a faith community. That some have worked so hard over a five year period to prepare these policies, and that we have them as part of our life together, is consistent with who we are as a community committed to receiving and living out God's love. That love is unconditional and at the same time calls us to a way of life in community. That love means acceptance of people as they are, and also calls us to accountability, to grow into the fullness of our humanity as God created us. That love means freedom to be the unique and precious persons God created and calls us to be, and it means responsible living in community with one another.

Jesus stood solidly within his own Jewish spiritual tradition, with the central commandments to love God with one's whole being, and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Loving God means loving others. This kind of love is not an emotion, but a way of living, a way of relating to others and the world. (Mark 12:28 ff).

The apostle Paul wrote many letters to help, and sometimes upbraid, the early Christian communities in terms of the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ. That Good News is the message of Grace, God's free gift of love. Those who received that gift of love were bound to live out that love with one another, in their life together. Here are a few excerpts that give us the idea:

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law...Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” (Romans 13:8, 10)

“For you were called to freedom brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self indulgence, but through love become servants to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Galatians 5:13-14)

“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called....” (Ephesians 4:1)

“As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another, and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other...Above all clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” (Colossians 3:12-14)

And closing his second letter to the contentious community in Corinth, Paul wrote: “Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.” (2 Corinthians 13:11)

The Safe Church and Child Protection Policies are a concrete expression of who we are as a community of God's love known in Jesus Christ. It is a love that accepts us and a love that calls us to be accountable for living out that love toward ourselves and one another.

Churches, out of the best of motivations, often want to be trusting and accepting—part of the love I am talking about. Sometimes, however, this has resulted in ignoring or covering over harmful behavior. We are very aware of and horrified by the pervasiveness of the abuse of children and youth in churches, and not only the Roman Catholic Church. It has involved church members, volunteer leaders, clergy, and denominational leadership. Not only sexual misconduct but other kinds of abusive behavior often occur and continue because good church people did not want to seem unaccepting or judging, or they simply did not want to make waves. For these reasons and others, churches, as Kaye can attest, resist the idea of adopting policies and practices that protect children as well as all who are in congregations. We are learning that trust and acceptance, combined with caution, watchfulness, openness, and boundaries, provide a community life that is truly loving in transformative ways.

Having Safe Church and Child Protection policies means that we want to be a faith community that is welcoming, safe, and redemptive, a community in which all people who desire to make a commitment to be part of our life and work will be free to grow into the fullness of who God made them and calls them to be. And an important part of that is growing into the responsibility and accountability that are part of a community of God's love as we know it in Jesus.

Essentially, what do these policies say? Most importantly, they mean that children will be accepted, respected, and protected. For example, anyone coming into our community with a background of abusive behavior in any form will not be allowed to be with children. At the same time, we will make our best effort to include such persons, in our life and work, but in a way that does not allow for potential harm to children. These policies mean that in our community there will be no hitting, no touching that makes anyone uncomfortable, no speaking that intimidates, harasses, condemns, judges, or makes people afraid. It means that everyone will be able to share their ideas within an atmosphere of MUTUAL respect. That means each one of us is free to speak, but also expected to listen. Having these policies means that we will do these things to the best of our ability.

I have been working with congregations for forty years. I love the church as a community of God's love, where people strive to follow Jesus and to learn what it means to love one another. And yet, I have seen behavior in churches that one would not expect from a normal, mature human being. Kaye and I have often marveled at seeing some people act in ways in the church that they would never act elsewhere. I have come to see that we as spiritual communities have not been clear with ourselves and others that being part of Jesus' community, the church, means not only receiving the grace of God's love, that accepts "a wretch like me," as the hymn says, but also means being held accountable for and helped to grow in what it means to live out the love of God we know in Jesus.

Our community is so blessed to already have an understanding of this. We know, or at least we talk about, the importance of accountability and responsibility as part of the life of faith. We know that God's love is redemptive not only because it accepts us unconditionally but also because it calls us to fullness of life the way God created us to live and to live together.