

Church of the Covenant
Lynchburg, Virginia
July 22, 2018

THE SACRAMENT OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Galatians 2:11-13; 3:27-29
1 Corinthians 11:27-34
Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-17

Thank Pastor Dan Harrison

- Role in Red Letter Christian Revival
- Indian witness – Choctaw Nation

Pay tribute to Church of the Covenant

- Brenda and I have enjoyed a 52 year friendship with you, and have admired
- Your spiritual discipline as a congregation
- Your service to the Lynchburg Community
 - In championing the needs of the poor,
 - in pioneering in race relations
 - in advancing interfaith collaboration
 - and opening these magnificent grounds to children and youth.
- You have inspired all of us who have been blessed by your steadfast and faithful ministry over the 63 years of your life together.

The heart of our public witness at First Christian Church, shaped in part by the example you have set here at the Church of the Covenant, is embodied in a motto or axiom which we proclaim, “God loves you, no exceptions!” As a community of faith which celebrates the Eucharist every Sunday, we stress inclusiveness in our invitation to the Lord’s Table as do you!

Some of you were present when the Rev. Brandon Gilvin suggested in his Turner- Warren Lecture at First Christian that welcoming everyone to the Lord’s Table, no exceptions, was not enough. Given the political climate in which we live with the deterioration of public discourse and the distressing division in our nation’s aspirations, we

need to add “resistance” as one of the church’s sacraments, he suggested.

I agreed with Brandon’s concern but searched for a different word to talk about our public witness, one that encouraged constructive preparation and effective practice with respect to our Christian values, not just protest of our opposition.

- What is the role of the church in preparing its members to be good citizens, especially in opposing injustice, racism, and greed?
- How do we as followers of Jesus choose our public leaders and then hold them accountable?
- How do we reign in our self-interest in order to serve the common good?
- Can we compromise our preferred outcome with respect to public policies advocated by our opposition without sacrificing our principles and values as followers of Jesus?

I have chosen “accountability” as a reframing word to delineate our role as a community of faith when it comes to our life together, whether it be within the church or within the larger community in which we live. Today I want to talk about “The Sacrament of Accountability” beginning with how we prepare the Body of Christ, the church, for engagement in it’s public witness.

Paul on Accountability

The Apostle Paul was open and affirming in valuing diversity and inclusiveness in his description of the church’s composition and mission.

- He believed he was called to introduce Gentiles, non-Jews, to the Christian faith, many of whom were treated as unwelcomed outsiders by his religious community.
- Paul rebuked Peter, a leader of the church in Jerusalem and the primary spokesman for the disciples of Jesus, for eating freely with Gentile Christians in Antioch until a delegation from Jerusalem and James showed up. Then he withdrew and kept himself separate “for fear of the circumcision party.” (Galatians 2:11-14)

- This party did not believe in accepting Gentiles into the Christian community until they first became Jews by circumcision.
- Furthermore, this party insisted that
 - Observant Jews refrain from eating Gentile meat and drinking Gentile wine.
 - Apparently, Barnabas, who became Paul's missionary partner, joined Peter in this duplicity, this hypocrisy.
- We learn about this in Paul's letter to the Galatians in which he insists, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ." (Galatians 3:26-28)
- Paul held Peter accountable for the faith they shared. To the Gentiles who already had become part of Paul's church in Antioch, Paul declared: "...if you belong to Christ, then you (too) are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29), meaning you have equal standing before God without circumcision, without becoming a Jewish convert first! "God loves you, no exception!"

Paul provides a second example of the sacrament of accountability in his first letter to the church in Corinth. He suggests one exclusion from the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper. "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves." (1 Corinthians 11:27-29)

Let me sketch the context for these words. When the leisure class, that is the rich, arrived at their church gatherings, most likely held in the home of a wealthy church member, they would start eating and drinking almost immediately without waiting for the working class, the poor, who arrived late because of their jobs. They had no time to go home, prepare and bring food. By the time these workers arrived, there was little to no food left to share. This is why Paul said they were not discerning the body, meaning the church as a whole, the Body of Christ. This scene gives content to the deadly sin of gluttony! Some had even gotten drunk before the others arrived. This abuse of the Lord's Supper led Paul to describe their behavior as

contempt for the church of God and humiliation for those who have nothing. With this going on he asks in exasperation, “How can I commend you?” (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). Paul proceeds to instruct the congregation on how they should behave and conduct themselves when partaking in a worthy manner that honors the whole Body of Christ. “Wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation.” (1 Corinthians 11:33-34)

I am leading a Bible Study at The Summit on the Book of Genesis. In reading about Cain and Abel in Chapter 4, one of the ironies in this chapter is the fact that the first murder in the Bible was over a conflict regarding religious practices, namely, the worship of God. We must face honestly that sin lurks within the community of faith and not just in the world at large. The church is the best starting place to learn conflict resolution before we take our witness to the public square.

The discipline Paul introduced at Corinth was self-examination and voluntary exclusion from the Lord’s Table. Church discipline was not imposed by Paul or some church authority to shame or punish. Rather it was a voluntary agreement entered into when an individual asked to be received into the covenant community. There they freely held themselves accountable to one another.

When a new member affiliates formally with First Christian Church, the congregation responds in unison from the Chalice hymnal: “we gladly welcome you into this community of faith, enfolding you with our love and committing ourselves to your care. In the power of God’s Spirit let us mutually encourage each other to trust God and strengthen one another to serve others, that Christ’s church may in all things stand faithful.” We pledge to hold each other accountable for our faith commitment and to contribute to each other’s spiritual growth. Our motto is our way of encouraging every person who walks through our doors to trust God. “God love you, no exceptions!”

Matthew on Conflict Resolution

Matthew’s Gospel has an exclusion from the Lord’s Table as well which has always amused me! “So when you are offering your gift at

the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23-24) “Leave your gift at the altar!” Church treasurers have to love this verse! “Leave your gift at the altar while you resolve conflicts between yourself and your neighbor. Don’t take it with you!” My take on this instruction is this: Your brother and sister are fellow members of the congregation. If things don’t work out, you may get so angry that you are tempted to withhold your offering from the church and even break fellowship with the congregation! So leave your offering at the altar! Now you have skin in the game!

Matthew outlines a more detailed procedure in chapter 18 for the process of reconciliation. “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” I interpret this need for privacy as protecting the dignity and self-esteem of the offending party. “If the member listens to you, you have regained that one,” Matthew says. Reconciliation is always the goal, not the discharging of one’s anger or the shaming of the offender. This is an example of living out of ones values and not out of ones passions.

What I like about this passage is the fact that the initiative for reconciliation rests with the person who has received the offense. The work of love, to which we are called is a sacrament of accountability which begins within the community of faith where we learn to form durable relationships before we take our witness to the public square.

“... if you are not listened to,” Matthew continues, “take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or more witnesses.” Sounds like good advice our President could have used last week! I like to think of these witnesses as functioning as mediators between the two parties and not merely as legal witnesses present to embarrass or expose the person being confronted. I would interpret their presence in the church as a ministry of pastoral care to both parties involved in a conflict or dispute.

“If the offending member refuses to listen to them,” Matthew continues, “tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let them be to you as a Gentile or tax collector.” (vv. 15-17). This is not permission to take the gloves off and shame or shun or excommunicate, but an instruction to recognize that this member is not sufficiently mature in his or her faith development to take responsibility for the care of others. The mature church member continues to engage the offender, but as one who has not yet understood and embraced the Christian faith adequately, and may need to be nurtured as an infant in the faith so that the offender can grow beyond his or her resistance and self-interest to contribute to the common good. Loving another in these difficult circumstances is very hard work and requires infinite patience.

Paul on Gentleness

Paul has wise counsel again in Galatians for this stage in the process of conflict resolution. “My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.” (Galatians 6:1) We hear Paul speaking as a pastor skilled in interpersonal relationships.

Earlier in Galatians he identified “gentleness” as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. (Galatians 5:23) And here he adds “Take care that you yourselves are not tempted,” meaning, “You may find yourself tempted in the same way this brother or sister has been tempted.” In other words, “Remember that you too are a sinner and just as capable of acting out as that brother or sister who has transgressed and been overtaken in a fault.” In confronting an offender, be humble, be understanding, be gentle, be compassionate, be loving in your spirit. Your goal is always reconciliation, never exclusion, detachment, or separation.

St. Augustine would say that our primary mission in loving is to teach our neighbor to love God.

If time permitted, I would describe how Paul held Philemon accountable for his treatment of his runaway slave, Onesimus. It’s an illustration of how persuasive Paul could be and what a caring pastor he had become.

Application

For now I want to return to Paul's advice to the Corinthians: Examine yourselves" he urges!

What would need to happen at the Church of the Covenant for each of you to realize passionately how important coming together as close friends is, not just as acquaintances,

- to care for one another and
- to contribute to each other's spiritual growth?

What would a Sacrament of Accountability look like within this covenant fellowship? Let me suggest, you would become a people

- Who cannot wait to be together!
- Whose love and commitment to one another would become a daily prayer of thanksgiving to God!
- Whose gathering is essential for nurturing your own faith and enabling you to grow in grace! It takes a church to raise a Christian!
- Whose study of scripture would be "for learning, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness," as a student of Paul declared in First Timothy, "so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16)

I recognize that your church discipline already calls for these values and that you are advanced in your practices as a covenant community.

What has to happen for more of us to take very seriously the importance of spending quality time with each other as the Body of Christ, the church?

- We do not come here just to be entertained, though playing together is a valuable part of our fellowship as our children remind us.
- We come here for spiritual formation,
 - To grow in our faith
 - To mature in our convictions
 - To practice what we believe,

- To contribute to the spiritual wellbeing of fellow church members,
- To hold one another accountable in our beliefs and in our behavior, in our witness, and in our service.
- We gather to encourage, to comfort, to teach, to support one another.
- We gather to share our joys and our concerns in worship so that we will know how to pray for one another.

This cannot happen without developing some mutually agreed upon process by which we hold each other accountable. This is what it means to be a covenant community.

- We are motivated not by a desire to embarrass, expose, shame or put one another down.
- A mature accountability covenant aims to restore, to build up, to strengthen the Body of Christ, to aspire to the holiness expressed in God's perfection. (Matthew 5:48)

The early church realized that many people were flocking to their growing communities without being adequately formed spiritually. The leadership developed procedures to teach the faith and introduce candidates for Christian baptism to Christian ethics embedded in love of God and love of neighbor. These early followers of Jesus worked at Christian unity by developing procedures for resolving conflict and living together in peace. They invited church members to identify those areas of their lives in which they needed to grow.

Students of the faith learn

- That behavior has consequences for ourselves and for others
- That our speech and our conduct really do make a difference
- That self-examination and peer accountability are essential for overcoming evil with good (Romans 12:21)
- That temptation and sin require daily vigilance and meaningful feedback from those we trust
- That communal support is necessary for an individual to sustain his or her resolve and to persevere in the face of opposition, discrimination, oppression, false witness, exploitation, betrayal, and abuse.

Conclusion

A very tragic event occurred on Easter Sunday in Cleveland, Ohio last year.

- Steve Stephens, a 37 year old job counselor who worked with teens and young adults, in his reported words, “just sapped” and shot a total stranger on the street,
- Robert Godwin Sr., a 74 year old retired foundry worker, returning home from an Easter dinner with his extended family.
- Then Steve did another horrible thing. He posted on Facebook the actual killing, which he recorded as he pulled the trigger of his gun, taking the life of his random target.
- When found and apprehended in Erie, PA sometime later, Steve committed suicide before being taken into custody.
- I listened with profound grief to the interviews with the daughter and son of the victim, Robert Godwin. They voiced their shock and grief without hesitation on learning of their father’s death.
- But then they began to express their forgiveness almost immediately because, as the son, Robby Miller said, “we too are sinners!”
- The daughter, Tonya Godwin Bains, reported that her dad had taught her how to know God, how to love God, how to fear God in the sense of reverence, and how to forgive.
- She added, “We need to wrap our arms around him (Steve Stephens) without animosity. He is a very sick individual.” Describing her sadness for the suspect, yet to be apprehended, and his family, Tonya said, “That mother lost a son; his children lost their dad!”
- Finally, she added, “My dad would be proud of us! ‘They know not what they do,’” she concluded, quoting words straight from the mouth of Jesus, hanging on a cross! Remarkable maturity and exceptional spiritual formation!

Where did this father, Robert Godwin, learn to teach his children about Jesus Christ, about love, compassion, forgiveness, and grace in the presence of grief and suffering and death? He participated in a community of faith which practiced the sacrament of accountability. So, he taught his children to live their faith-

- That God loves you, no exceptions!

- That forgiveness keeps us from getting trapped in anger and revenge.
- That compassion enables us to enter the suffering of others who are just like ourselves.
- That grieving is how we heal.
- That the best way to honor our father's memory is to put into practice the faith he taught us, especially in times of shock and grief.
- That living out of our values rather than our passions sets us free to love like God loves.

We are not born with these skills, we have to learn them somewhere!

This family had been nurtured by a community of faith, River of God Ministries, which had enabled them to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. They had tasted the kindness of the Lord and learned to live the promise and the blessing of God in their beliefs and in their behavior. God be praised!

Let us pray.

**Look, Father, look on his anointed face,
and only look on us as found in him;
look not on our misusings of thy grace,
our prayers so languid and our faith so dim;
for lo, between our sins and their reward
we set the Passion of thy Son our Lord.
Amen. (William Bright, 1874)**

**Nathan C. Brooks, III
Pastor Emeritus
Peakland Baptist Church
(Served as Minister, 1966-1999)**

