

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 3/14/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, March 15 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for someone whose views differ from yours. Ask God to bless them as you seek to find common ground for understanding. Pray for patience when relating to another whose ideas and desires are different from your own.*

Some time ago, I wrote about the human need to have a common enemy. We align ourselves into “tribes” and then protect ourselves and battle against a mutually shared foe. For the United States during the cold war, it was the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, when the USSR dissolved, that common enemy for many became those who were on the other side of the political aisle. That division has become more pronounced in recent years. The invasion of the Ukraine has resulted in the emergence or elevation of another shared enemy—Russia, or more specifically, Vladimir Putin—that has unified the European Union, the NATO alliance, and the world as a whole.

In sports, those common enemies are more often called rivalries. In baseball, the great rivalries include the Dodgers and the Giants and the Yankees and the Red Sox. In football, the Packers and the Bears have been a huge rivalry. The Lakers and Celtics have competed fiercely against each other over the years in basketball. Corporately, we see the same thing. Coca-Cola vs. Pepsi. McDonald’s vs. Burger King. Macy’s vs. Gimbel’s. Microsoft vs. Apple. Ford vs. Chevy. The pandemic has also led to the evolution of competing tribes: vaxxers and anti-vaxxers, and maskers and anti-maskers. Even in religion there are rivalries between denominations, that have at times reached the point where another group is viewed literally as an enemy.

Sadly, we even have such divisions within our congregation. Most notably, though the term “enemy” would absolutely not be used, when it comes to preference in worship style, there seems to be little tolerance for those whose desired worship mode is different from the one “I” lean toward. Often, I hear the terms “we” and “they” used and “they” is frequently spoken with an implication of “them” just being wrong. Certainly, there are many who have graciously embrace both styles during this time when we’ve needed to blend our services into one, being fed by those parts of the service that most speak to them and rejoicing in the parts of the service that appeal to others. Yet, for some, there seems little acceptance of those inclusions in worship that feel less worshipful than other parts. Rather than praising God that we can gather as one congregation with multiple worship styles included, the focus for some is more directed at finding what’s “not what I want,” and then criticizing it rather than celebrating that others are also able to be nurtured by what God is offering that is more engaging for them.

In John 13:34-35, Jesus tells His followers, *“A new command I give you. Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.”* The word “love” used here is the Greek word “agape.” It is best described as an unconditional love that seeks to bless the other without any expectation of receiving something in return. It is the kind of love that Jesus demonstrated when He gave up His life so that we might be freed from the requirement of paying for our sin. It is the kind of love that parents show for their children and spouses show for each other, sacrificing one’s own preferences and desires, so that the

other might have what they want or need. It is this kind of love that Jesus calls us to live, beginning with our sisters and brothers in Christ.

As we are coming closer to the end of the mandates that have been given because of the pandemic, I am seeing, not just an urgency, but an impatience to get back to normal (not the “new normal” but the normal we think we remember from before). We will be relaxing our guidelines in the near future, though perhaps not as quickly as some may want. But these decisions are always made with the whole of the congregation in mind and in ways that seek to accommodate the wishes of as many as possible while honoring the hesitations of others. When the early Christian church considered whether to allow Gentiles to be invited in, or whether to continue requiring circumcision, they did so in respectful face-to-face conversation, listening and seeking to understand the positions of all. Then they prayerfully reached a consensus that allowed the church to continue to grow and thrive, even in the midst of difficult times. We, too, need to take the time to listen and to talk with one another, seeking to respectfully hear and understand each perspective. Then prayerfully we should strive to graciously reach decisions that are respectful and that most of all follow the loving example our Lord set for us and calls us to model with one another.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey