

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
May 5, 2013**

Church Fellowship sermon series – #3

John 8:31

Love Motivates

- 1. We Gather Together**
- 2. We Can't Pretend to Agree**
- 3. So We Practice Fellowship**
- 4. Let Love Guide You!**

**Hymns: 161 – 469 – Distribution: 537 – 167
Closing: 158 (vv.1,4)**

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John 8:31

The teenage boy is absolutely smitten. He walks to school every morning with a smile on his face. He gets butterflies in his stomach every time he passes her in the hall. He hasn't heard a word that his teachers have said in weeks. Love has filled this young boy's heart. But his girlfriend seems to be losing interest. So he comes up with a plan. As he listens to her raving about her favorite band, he lets her know that they are his favorite as well. When she complains about Mrs. Jones and the homework she gave, he complains too. When she orders a ham sandwich, he orders the same. When she laughs, he laughs; when she is mad, he is mad. Everything that she likes, he loves; everything she dislikes, he hates. And it seems to work. His girl is happier than ever.

But eventually a problem arises. The feeling that had filled this boy's heart has disappeared. The excitement has fizzled. The connection is gone. He had pretended to agree with everything in this girl's life with the hope that it would work out, but the charade was up. The relationship would not last.

When it comes to relationships, it simply does not work to pretend to agree, hoping that a working and healthy relationship will follow. And yet, as we look out at today's religious climate, there are more churches than ever before, from denominations all across the board, that are pretending to agree when it comes to their view on Scripture and its teachings. This is called ecumenism. For unity, for a good

relationship, many Christians want to pretend like there are no differences and unite for the "good" of the Church.

However, what is true of a high school relationship happens to be true in the church. You can't pretend to agree. You can't just say that you agree on everything, hoping that a solid and productive fellowship results. Eventually problems arise, and when it happens in the church, Christ, his Kingdom, and his Word suffer the pain.

When it comes to Baptists and Methodists and Lutherans and Presbyterians, and all of the other branches on the Christian tree, the reality is that there are differences in what we hear God saying to us in his Word. And there are even differences that are found inside those denominations. Some churches hear something very different when it comes to the purpose of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Some churches hear something very different about how a person comes to faith. Some churches hear very different ideas about the end times and Jesus' second return.

Those differences and many others do not keep a person from having saving faith in Jesus as their Savior from their sins. But those differences do impact the relationships that we have here on this earth with our fellow Christians. Instead of pretending that we are alike in every way, we separate our fellowship from those who do not have the same viewpoint on the teachings of Scripture that we have. And as we make that separation, we are motivated by love.

In John 8:31, Jesus said, "***If you hold to my teaching, you are truly my disciples.***" In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus told the disciples how they could show him that they loved him. "***If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching.***"

As we look through Scripture, it becomes clear that the whole Bible is the teaching that Jesus was talking about. As Paul wrote to young Timothy, he said this, "***All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful.***" Through many years and many men, God gave mankind his teaching about the way in which a person is saved. And through many more years, God has protected his Word and brought it to us today. Protecting the whole Word of Truth was important to Jesus, he stressed it to his disciples; he presented that duty as a way of showing their love for him. And it wasn't always the easiest duty for them to follow. As we look through the New Testament epistles, we see separations that occurred and tough decisions that were given as the church stood up for the teaching they had received. And Jesus has brought the pure Word into our lives as well and has given us that same opportunity to show our love for him and his

Word, by protecting the truth. He asks us to have convictions as we study that word.

When we protect the truth of God's Word, when we follow Jesus' command out of love for him, we are actually showing love in two other ways as well. The Word of God shows to us, and every other person, the path to eternal life. John wrote in chapter 20 of his gospel, ***"These are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."*** (John 20:31) Though Jesus has done all the work required for our salvation, the journey to heaven is still not an easy one. As we go through our days, the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh put bumps in the road that try to knock us off of the path to heaven.

But it is the whole Word of God that keeps us on that path as it serves as ***"a lamp to our feet and a light for our path."*** (Psalm 119:105) When we decide that some of the teachings of God's Word are not that important, or think that by disregarding some of them, life would be easier, we are actually dimming the light that guides our way. Consequently, when we are tempted to abandon any part of the Bible, when we become less firm in our convictions, we are actually making the journey to heaven more difficult for us. So, it is love for our souls that serves as our second motivation for separating from other Christians.

And though it is not always seen this way by those around us, the Bible says that love is shown in one other way as we guard these teachings. In 1 John 5. It says, ***"This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands."*** (1 John 5:2) When we are firm in our adherence to the whole Word of God and we obey Christ's command to hold onto his teaching, even as churches around us throw away some of those teachings, we are not just acting out of love for Christ, his Word, and ourselves. John tells us that when we do this, we are also showing love to the children of God who teach differently than us.

To stand for the teachings that we believe and have become convinced of is always a show of love. But sadly, sin often causes people to miss that. Sin causes people to get mixed up about what love is. Godly, Christian love is not liking someone for the way that that person happens to be. That is the definition that we often hear for love in the world around us today. It is the love that we are encouraged to promote. It is the love that we are encouraged to put into practice, especially with anyone who calls themselves Christians. With that kind of love in our lives, we would wipe away all the differences, get rid of the denominations, and join together with all.

But that is not the definition of love that God has given to us in his wisdom and in his Word. Instead,

through the Word, we see love defined this way: ***"God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*** (Romans 5:8) ***' This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.'*** (1 John 3:16) Godly, Biblical love means doing whatever is necessary to help the person we love, even if it means great cost. God, in his love, pointed out our sins and their disastrous result. He also, in his love, gave the costly answer by giving up his own Son to death. Jesus, in his love, never hesitated to tell people that it was because of their sins that he was in this world. However, in his love, he also endured personal pain to mend the relationship.

As Paul prepared Timothy for his life of ministry, he told him that his love for God, the Word and people would force him to not always say what people wanted to hear. As he met those who were doing away with sound doctrine, Paul encouraged Timothy to ***"preach the Word; correct, rebuke and encourage."*** He was to stand firm in the teachings he had been given. However, he also added that he should do so with ***"great patience and careful instruction."*** We also should never hesitate when we see people going away from the teachings of the Word, but just as sin causes people to get mixed up about love, it also often happens that we don't correct, rebuke, and encourage in the most loving of ways.

To practice loving fellowship, four steps should always guide us. As Christian people who have been called to grow in and share the Word of God, we should never hesitate to open up our Bibles and study the Word with anyone, as long as we clearly understand what we are trying to accomplish. We do not study together to celebrate our common Christian faith. However, we can study the Word with Christians from other denominations to understand their beliefs and share our convictions.

As we study the Word, we will make confessions about what we believe. We study the Word so that we can be firm in those confessions. And as we make those confessions, it will be clear whether the same beliefs are shared amongst the group.

When we find common connections as we look at the teachings that Christ has given to us in his Word, we can celebrate those connections. We can give thanks that God has worked faith in hearts that were once darkened by sin and unbelief. We can rejoice that one day, we will all be in heaven in perfect unity and fellowship and faith. We can long for the day when there will be no more differences among the followers of Christ.

However, we must avoid making false impressions. We must admit that the fellowship that we have on this earth is something that we live out

imperfectly, because it is limited. When a full agreement is not found, we must not pretend like there is complete unity. We can't pretend to agree with people when we don't agree with them on words that are so important. So we need to consider what impression our fellowship with other Christians might have. What are we saying if we acknowledge differences, but then pray together? What impression are we giving if we see glaring cracks, but then worship and commune together? If we see someone going against the Word, but then say, "It's all good." Are we showing love as Christ has asked us?

As we consider the ways that we practice fellowship, let us strive to have our words and our actions say the same thing. Let us strive to have our fellowship protect the truth of God's Word that we treasure. But most importantly, let us strive to show and practice love as we follow Christ's commands. Amen.