

Sensitivity Training
Sunday School Lesson
Romans 14
November 27, 2022

Today the lesson is about how we disagree but maintain the body of Christ. I have witnessed congregations argue over just about everything. In my first church, there was serious disagreement over Jesus. Some believed Jesus was the son of God while others believe something very strange that I would not have understood without some of my classes at seminary. My second church argued over many things but one particular argument was over their roof that had been leaking for 15 years. They did not do anything to repair it because they believed it would cost too much money. Meanwhile, many of our beautiful wooden pews and walls in the chapel were ruined by water. (We fixed it for \$14,000) In my third appointment, one church argued over breakfast before Sunday School and the other church argued over their inappropriate accounting practices. The next three appointments? I cannot even begin to list all their issues. What all of these churches worked towards is having a way to talk about issues without harming the church as a whole.

Let us pray

O Holy God,

We thank you for your Spirit that lives with us each day. Give us wisdom to make the choices that lead to a life of joy and generosity. Help us listen to your Spirit so we may discern your ways. Amen.

Our Purpose Statement:

To remain true to our own faith tradition and celebrations while exhibiting sensitivity to those of other traditions.

Central United Methodist Church in Rogers, Arkansas

If you go to the website of Central UMC in Rogers, you can find a page that tells their history. What I love about that history is that it shares its story from the beginning. It pays homage to the churches who formed then merged together over their origins which began after the Civil War. In the 1990s, the resulting church of all these mergers was First United Methodist Church of Rogers. That church decided to explore moving to a location where they had more space and would be more convenient to the growing population. That meant they had to give up their existing beautiful building. When they finally voted, the decision to move passed by one point. The church had become very divided and they made the decision to split. While the new church was being built, the two congregations continued to share the same building. It was hard.

Most people believed that Central UMC in Rogers, now one of our largest churches, would leave and join the new Global Methodist Church because many of their recent pastors are leading their congregations to leave the UMC. It is my understanding that the church leadership refused to enter such a divisive process because they still remember the pain that happened 30 years ago.

Early Christianity

We have two thousand years of church history and theological reflection and understanding. The early church had none of those things. They were beginning something entirely new. They also were coming from huge differences in backgrounds, belief systems, cultures, and economic status. Of course, they had disagreements and misunderstandings! It is a miracle and a tribute to the Holy Spirit that the early churches ever survived. Over the last two thousand years, many churches have become corrupted by power, money, and the alignment of the church with political power. Still, the

Spirit has enabled the Kingdom to go forward producing fruit. It is an amazing story of redemption and reconciliation.

Read Romans 14

For the first thirteen chapters of Romans, Paul lays out his understanding of God, the salvation offered through Jesus Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, and what those things mean for those who choose to become a disciple and enter this way of life and community. He ends the chapter with these words:

The night is almost over, and the day is near. So let's get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness and put on the weapons of light. Let's behave appropriately as people who live in the day, not in partying and getting drunk, not in sleeping around and obscene behavior, not in fighting and obsession. Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don't plan to indulge your selfish desires.

If you are going to follow Jesus, you must follow as a part of a community. There is no other way to grow in your faith. Most of us can be faithful within our homes especially if we live alone. It is something else to be a part of a community. We do not think alike. We have not experienced things in the same way. And yet, we are expected to have a share concern for the welfare and spiritual growth of each other.

Our church has Sunday School classes that have worship together for decades. What is amazing about these classes is that they readily welcome new people. Yes, our classes may look alike but they do have differing political ideas and they have differing opinions on many things. And yet, they have found ways to be loving and supportive, putting aside their differences to encourage the body as a whole. Well done, friends.

Rights versus Responsibility?

In 1995, Bill Easum wrote a book for churches called Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers. This book shows how an atmosphere of permission-giving, which signals the end of leaders as enablers, can help church leaders transcend bureaucracy and enhance spiritual gifts rather than assign them. The 'sacred cows' of control and regulation can be devoured, as leaders and people are converted to a new style of ministry. When a church has done the exact same thing the same way for decades, one generation often believes the traditions should be carried on by the next generation and they "assign" the person who is to takeover doing what they did in the exact same way it was done before. COVID broke that cycle for many and we have found ways to rethink ways to reach more people. Another well done, my friends.

As a member of a community of faith, does anyone have the right to demand something be done their way if they are unwilling to do it? Wouldn't it be better to sit down with the younger members of the congregation and listen to the challenges of their lives and discuss how we can adjust for the new realities of modern families? We have more of a responsibility to each other than a right to do things our way.

What Can We Learn?

Prayer – God, help us to continue to love one another, especially in these times of change. By your Spirit, may we listen before we speak. May we understand before we jump to judgment. May our witness of loving one another bear fruit for your Kingdom. Amen.