

### The Church's 'One Anothers'

There are a lot of "shoulds" and "should nots" that circulate in our world today which sound a lot like rules. Like what we should and should not eat—these rules seem to change every ten years or so. Remember when eggs were considered off the healthy diet because of cholesterol concerns? Now there's "healthy fat" and butter is not as bad for you as sugar. But everyone should drink more water, although those nasty plastic water bottles aren't good for the environment. We hear advice about the best kind of exercise, how to raise children, and how to clean your house. I recently read an article about cleaning bathrooms, and my #1 takeaway was that I've been cleaning toilets the wrong way all these years.

We may feel bombarded by all the "shoulds" and "should nots." And that feeling might make us want to turn off all the advice and just do things our own way. We may even hear scripture such as today's epistle reading and say, "I'll never live up to that," and so continue muddling along as we've always done.

But here's the good news. This apparent list of "shoulds" and "should nots" is not really a list of rules to follow. It is not a prescription for life improvement. It is a description of the grace-filled life of a community filled with Christ. When we are made new by the Spirit, clothed with Christ, the likeness of God shines in us as God's beloved children. God is love, and when we imitate God, love governs our lives.

It is in the Christian community that we practice living in love. This is our school of love, right here. So you may not be surprised that the New Testament is filled with descriptions of how that love is manifest to, with, and for "one another." By my count, there are 56 times that the writers of the New Testament use the phrase "one another" to describe the life of the church. Several of those are in this chapter of Ephesians: bear with one another, be kind to one another, and forgive one another. 20 of the 56 times are the umbrella phrase, the great overarching plan, the commandment of Christ. You know it: Love one another. So if you'll join me in creating a simple litany, we can feel the impact of hearing many of those phrases all together, a description of living in God's grace. Every time I say one of the more specific phrases, you reply with "Love one another." Ready?

Welcome one another	Love one another
Live in harmony with one another	Love one another
Bear with one another	Love one another
Instruct one another	Love one another
Confess your sins to one another	Love one another
Admonish one another	Love one another
Provoke one another to love and good deeds	Love one another
Be kind to one another	Love one another
Pray for one another	Love one another

Bear one another's burdens	Love one another
Become slaves to one another	Love one another
Encourage one another	Love one another
Build up one another	Love one another
Forgive one another	Love one another
Lay down your lives for one another	Love one another
Be at peace with one another	Love one another
Wait for one another	Love one another
Wash one another's feet	Love one another
Have care for one another	Love one another
Do good to one another	Love one another
Serve one another	Love one another
Have fellowship with one another	Love one another
And finally, Greet one another with a holy kiss.	Love one another

In the school of love, we are members of one another. Love is our unifying force, love is our common goal, and love is our superpower.

Dan and I have been referring to this summer's sermons as our "farewell tour," getting ready to leave by sharing one more time the core message we've tried to share for 24 ½ years. This is my word for today: remember the "one anothers" as you navigate this next season in the life of First Presbyterian Church. They are not "shoulds," but "gifts." They are not rules, they are expressions of the grace given through Jesus Christ. Now, the text tells us to speak truth, and the truth is that individually, none of us could live up to all these expectations. Yet as members of one another, you may discover that your particular calling within the body is the manifestation of one or more of these specific "one anothers." And so, collectively, this church is able to live as Christ's body in the world. Together, emanating from this school of love, God's love can and will grow in the world.

There are some specifics in today's beautiful scripture which I think have special pertinence for these times.

First, the words, "Be angry, but do not sin," a quote from Psalm 4, do not tell us that anger is unchristian. These are days when there is a lot to be angry about. We may be angry about the pandemic, or about the response of authorities to the pandemic, about vaccine refusal or vaccine mandates or about mask-wearing. I am sure there are some who feel anger that we are retiring at this time. Sometimes I feel that anger, too. The text tells us to speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Anger is a justified and natural emotion. This scripture warns us not against anger, but against the dangers that can accompany anger. When anger devolves into bitterness and slander and wrangling and malice, as the scripture warns, it makes "room for the devil." So "don't let the sun go down on your anger" is more than good premarital advice, for it means face your anger

honestly, deal with it straight away, don't let it fester and cause you to spiral downward, and don't let it control you. These are good words to remember in challenging circumstances.

A second memorable phrase in this text addresses the words we speak to one another. "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up." We are living in a time of way too much uncivil speech, fueled by social media without guardrails and leaders whose publicity strategy is to gain attention by saying outrageous things. Words matter. When we call ourselves Christian, we are calling ourselves people of the Word of God. So our witness to Christ calls us to build up, not tear down, one another. And the test for this speech is found in the remainder of this verse, which reads: "so that your words may give grace to those who hear." As recipients of God's grace, we are able to share grace in our speech. These are also good words to remember in the coming months.

My friends, the church of Jesus Christ is shaken often by scandal, power struggles, differing viewpoints, and change. The church of Jesus Christ is subject to the conflicts raging in the world around it and to problems generated by the people in it. The church of Jesus Christ is filled with sinners as well as saints, for the truth is, all of us are both. But the church of Jesus Christ endures because it has a mission which comes from God—to live and breathe and act as Christ in the world, reconciling the world to Godself. And this mission is sustained not by individual Christians achieving the perfection of living by Christian rules, but by the Spirit of God which joins us together and gives us grace to live together. The Spirit binds us in love for one another and for the world. That is who God is and what God does. Together, we imitate God, like children imitating their beloved parent. Love for one another imitates God's love for the world, and spreads that same love in the world.

That's what the world needs now, isn't it? Not rules, not all of us scrambling to adhere to the shoulds and should nots and giving up when we fail, but unifying love, Godly love, joyful, self-sacrificing, and forgiving love.

I know that kind of love is alive and well in this congregation. You will see it as we ordain and install elders and deacons to active service in this uncertain time. You will see it as we recognize the commitment of others to the legacy of this church. And if you linger for fellowship after the service, or venture out to Rockhaven this afternoon, you will feel it in the kindness and tenderheartedness which welcome all into God's love.

May my words give grace to all who hear, as you abound in love for one another and for the world God loves.