

**“Disciplines of Humanness”**  
**Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
**July 13, 2014**

I want to begin this morning by talking about a conversation which is going on almost all the time these days, and it is a conversation which I am coming to believe (which is to say I was not there previously and I am hopefully evolving) is a threat to the essence of the church. This conversation (and you know it well) some of you pay great attention to and some of you don't pay as much attention to it, but you all know this conversation. It is a conversation that takes a variety of forms, and it hinges on a variety, of course, of issues. It may be a conversation about abortion, or about school prayer, or about gay people, or about people of other faith traditions, or about commandments, or about a variety of other Christian issues. All of these issues, and any that you would add to that list that I just named, are very important issues because they all impinge upon, and affect, people's lives in one way or another. Most of the conversation on this variety of issues is, in a sense, taking place outside the church in secular, or at least more secular arenas, and my sense is that these discussions, these conversations, really resolve very little and end up resolving very little, at least in the short term, but what they do very effectively is they put us all in our corners like boxers. We get in our corners on these issues, and we get our fists up and we engage the fight. We see it on talk shows, we see it on talk radio, and we see it in the newspaper, and it leaves us in our corners. This is, of course, about what we are calling (appropriately, I think) the culture war that has been going on in the United States for a number of decades now. We are engaged in a sort of battle that is going on.

This morning, in the Bertha Work Class, this same issue was being brought up in the lesson, and it is interesting in the way that it dovetailed with my message this morning.

What I want to talk about is the threat that this kind of conversation is making and what is being compromised in our faith. When we, as a local congregation (and there are many congregations like us), are trying to renew through memberships and new paint jobs, when we are trying to grow again, when we are trying to build the church up again, these culture war conversations, while they are, on one level, very important issues, are not very helpful because what they do is sacrifice the majority of the gospel for a sliver of scripture, so when we get into these discussions about the hot topics of the day, we start pointing at one or two verses of scripture, and we decide it is this issue that is the litmus test of our faith. When we do that, we begin to sacrifice the fullness of the gospel.

I want to go back and just talk about, as a congregation, as a Christian faith body, where we would start with our faith if we wanted to grow the church, if we wanted to be faithful, and if we wanted to have a healthy spiritual makeup to, at some point, talk about these culture war issues. Where would we begin? What would we go back to?

I want to raise up three issues for us to think about which I think are critical for us to remember and to re-engage with for what we are all about as the body of Christ and what our faithfulness actually hinges upon. Let's look at these three issues.

If we were to talk about the critical issue of faith in the Christian church, one issue that we could not get around, or ignore, is the issue of forgiveness. Forgiveness is the essence, or at least a part of the essence, of the Christian faith. Every single Sunday we pray "Forgive us of our sins as we forgive those who sin against us", and we do that every single Sunday, not just because that is tradition—though it is—but we do that because Jesus taught us this prayer, and in this prayer He was saying "This is essential to this new community of faith that has begun in Me". Being a community of forgiveness is a mark of healthy Christian faith.

There are all kinds and variations of forgiveness, and I am not really talking about bookkeeping forgiveness in the sense of when someone violates us and we forgive them and we check that off. I think forgiveness is much more complicated and much harder work than that. If we are a community of faith that has gotten its essence from forgiveness, what I think it means is that we engage one another with

forgiveness in place, which is to say that we, as a community, love people, not simply despite their “warts” but because of their “warts”. “Warts” are our shortcomings, and we cannot be the community of faith if we don’t have that graciousness to allow people to be different, to be human. So, one of our orientations as a community of faith is to be forgiving of people even before they violate us because we are imperfect, and what we know is that, as people, any relationship that we enter into with another human being, at some point, is going to involve and require forgiveness. The church, to be a healthy body of Christ, has to be centered in an ethic of forgiveness. That would be one of the disciplines of the faith.

A second discipline of the faith that we need to always work on, develop and nurture is the ethic of generosity. If we are a community of generosity, what we are doing in our generos/generis/generosity is that we are imitating God. We have a God of ultimate generosity, ultimate grace, a God who blesses us every single day, and if we are a community of faith and have as an ethic generosity, we are being faithful to the core of our understanding of God. Think about the power of being a community of generosity if that is our foundational ethic. When a church embodies generosity, it is very, very counter to our culture. We are not just talking about economic generosity, though we do practice that to the best of our abilities. We are talking about being generous with our building, with our welcome, with our acceptance, generous with our prayers, generous with our works in the community out there. You know when you meet a person of generosity. There is the spirit of Christ alive in them.

I suspect as a body of Christ, as a local church, if we have forgiveness in place as a foundational ethic, and generosity in place as a foundational ethic, a third component of that ethic is hospitality. What Rosina was talking about up there was really what I identify as the church as the place where a place is set at all times for others, that we would be a church where we are always ready to welcome the new person to the table. We would be the welcoming home place for the stranger.

Think about how we enact hospitality. I want to just celebrate for a minute a simple act of hospitality. It is such a wonderful example of how the church is hospitable. Some of you are blessed each morning by a little piece of candy from Frances Johnson. Where is Frances? Have you got some candy, Frances? She has this bag of candy. This is not a tremendous act. This is just a fantastic act. She goes around with a bag wide open to take some of her candy. I can’t resist every Sunday. What a symbol that is of generosity and hospitality, to walk around and freely give. I think that is what the church is called to do—find ways to be hospitable constantly to one another. I love that practice.

A couple of Sundays ago, I was talking about my joy of going to the supermarket with my mother. I talked about how I always slipped a box of Lucky Charms cereal in the basket when she wasn’t looking. When I came in on Monday, someone had bought me a little thing of Lucky Charms cereal. Now, that may seem kind of silly or trivial, but it was nice. It’s about celebrating people, by celebrating people’s experiences, being present with them, being generous and hospitable in every way that we deal with one another.

You should have seen the hospitality, generosity and deep forgiveness going on in that hallway yesterday when we were painting. I mean paint was being splattered all over the place, people sweating, getting paint here, getting it there, but it was not about perfection. It was about being the community of Christ, working together, beautifying our building, and doing it all with grace, forgiveness and hospitality.

I think as we go forward together, as we continue to grow and strengthen in our witness and our faith, what we work on is not the “hot button” issues of the day which just leave people in their corners. I know for a fact, with all of you gathered here, there are people in all different corners on all these different issues, but being in corners doesn’t get us anywhere. What gets us somewhere is that, as we work on forgiveness, generosity and hospitality, we start to love one another deeper and we start to see one another more humanely and we start to see Christ in one another. When all of that is healthy and nurtured in our spirit and in our spiritual development, when we are at our core as people of forgiveness, hospitality and generosity, when that is in place, we can talk about anything. We can talk about any issue we want to because we don’t really need to be absolutely right. We can talk with grace and forgiveness in the conversation. I hope that is really what we, as a congregation, work on and that we continue to work on these wonderful ethics of the church and we share it with one another and we grow in our faith.

In our hymn that we are going to sing in just a moment, this is a hymn about renewing the church and I love it. Three verses have to do with this: The second verse is “Teach us Your word” which is a way of singing about growing in our faith in the biblical narrative. The biblical narrative never ends. There is never a bottom to the scriptures. We never “get there” with the scriptures. We may want to say we “get there” or that we know it all, but we don’t. The renewal of the church has to do with growth into that area and understanding it more and more, so renewal is about “Teach us Your word”.

The third verse of this hymn is “Teach us to pray”. We are a praying community. We have one prayer in which sort of petitionary. We are asking God to help with, or to look over someone, or to heal someone. These are legitimate prayers and prayers close to our hearts, but the power of prayer also includes deep listening. The culture war issues, the issues that put us in the corner, are not about listening. They are about arguing. Never do we listen to the person with whom we are in dialogue. We just argue and try to win the argument, but “Teach us how to pray, O Lord” is about teaching us how to listen—to listen to God, to listen to the scriptures, to listen to one another, to understand each other’s struggles and pains and understand each other’s understandings, the world and all that we live in, so “Teach us to pray” is a very important part of renewing the church.

The final verse of that hymn that we will sing in a moment is “Teach us to love”. I think that love (and this is nothing new that a pastor has never said) is really the crux of our faith. If we can learn to love and practice loving one another, and practice loving even those with whom we disagree, what we move away from is an orientation of resentment.

My sense is that feelings of resentment now dominate many of our “hot button” discussions, but we are people of Christ. We are people of love, so we embody love. We don’t embody resentment. We can be that people of love, prayers and people of the word. We can really present to the world a new community—a new community that is not in corners but a community that is reaching out and saying “Here we are. We practice here a different method of love, prayer and a whole different story and we want you to be at the table with us”. I think we do that pretty well as a congregation. We are always working on it. We are never perfect but, oh boy, we put out the welcome mat here.

In fact, I have some folks who are going to be joining the church very shortly who said to me “We are joining this church because the first Sunday we came, we felt the warmth which is to say we felt the love”. We have that going for us. So, my hope is that, as we move forward, we will move forward with our renewal of the church, we will move forward in our spiritual lives, in our understanding of the scriptures and in our prayers. I think if we do that, if we build from that foundation, the future is as bright as can be. I say to all of you that that seems to be what you want, that you long to be that renewed church, that loving church, that praying church, that church that is getting its identity from renewal, and that is good news.

So, I thank you all, and I look forward to continuing to move forward, and we will move forward with struggles. We will argue about paint colors, maybe, but we will grow, and I am filled with hope (as I know many of you are). We have, indeed, already grown. That is God blessing upon our lives. Thank you, God, this day for the opportunity to be together and to bring the love of Christ to this world and to share it with one another. Amen.