

Sermon Text for September 15, 2019

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Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Acts 15:22-35

“In the essentials unity, in the non-essentials freedom.”

I hope you had a good week. It was one where the day of 9-11 came and went to not a whole lot of fanfare. It is a day that has changed the core essentials of who we are as Americans and so as a result has also changed who we are as Christians. It shouldn't be that way, but it is. We are different people as a result of what happened 18 years ago, to the point where maybe, just maybe our core essentials have changed.

If you look at our sermon title for today it almost seems as if that statement was made centuries ago. Urban legend attributes it to St. Augustine of the 4th century, but we have his works and he never said it. Scholarship more accurately places this statement well into the 17th century. It was still a long time ago, it is not in the Bible, but a lot of biblical principles can find resonance in this statement. It provides for both freedom and orthodoxy while at the same time asking the question: what are the essentials?

Our New Testament verses for today in Acts contains the word essentials which in Greek really means the fundamental rules. Last week we defined two essentials of our faith which is to love God and love our neighbor. We define ourselves as a body as people who are unified in loving God and unified in loving our neighbor.

But unity is not our final goal. Unity is not salvation. Faithfulness to God is our final goal. How do we remain faithful to the essentials while showing grace and freedom in the non-essentials or is every single stance make or break?

The early church in our reading today demonstrates and gives an example of how the apostles are able to reveal that the Gospel has given them the resources to confront controversy without being destroyed by it. Can we do the same?

READ SCRIPTURE

If we went around the room today and asked what are the essentials of Christian faith I bet that if there are 120 people here today we would get 150 answers. That's just who we are as people. We disagree, we don't always see things eye to eye, even the most fundamental and the most important things, the essentials aren't always essential for each of us.

Deuteronomy 6, our first Scripture for today, is one of the most classic Old Testament Scriptures that we have in the Bible. It is called the Shema because Shema in Hebrew means listen, or hear. This Scripture begins with Hear oh Israel. Shema Israele. All Jewish children

have to memorize these verses in Hebrew because they are considered essential. The Scripture itself speaks about teaching your children this essential of the Hebrew faith.

The Lord your God is one. There is one God and one God alone. This Scripture emphasizes the singularity, the uniqueness, the exclusiveness of God. There is only one way to God and as Christians as we read this Scripture where it tell us that there is one God and one God alone we interpret it and understand that in Jesus' words: no one gets to the Father except by him. Jesus is the way, the only way, the truth and the life no one gets to the father, to God, except through Jesus.

This is an essential, I would say the essential, this is a non-negotiable. But do we only have one essential? Last week we also saw that an essential to Christian faith is to love God and to love our neighbor. These two things are also essential.

As a denomination, as Presbyterians, we have what are called the great ends of the church. Yes, our love of Christ unifies us. Yes, our love of neighbor brings us together. But as Presbyterians we have these 6 great ends of the church that we should have in common in order to be defined as Presbyterians. 1 – The proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind, 2 – the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God, 3 – the maintenance of divine worship, 4 – the preservation of truth, 5 – the promotion of social righteousness and, 6 – the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

What defines us as Christians is that we would love our God and our neighbor. What is essential for a Presbyterian along with that are these 6 things. These are our denominational essentials which should explain much of what I do and what we are doing together. It is important to know that not all things are relative but that some things really do matter in how we live our life.

Often the church is more concerned with inclusiveness, openness and affirmation rather than being faithful to the historic faith of the church. We are quick to lay aside historic standards of doctrine and morality as being historically conditional and culture bound and thoroughly irrelevant to our own progressive world view.

This approach is not faithful to Scripture or to the God who loves us but also expects, nay hopes, something from us as well, not as a conditionality, but rather as a hope, a wish that we would respond as our Savior Jesus taught us to respond. The church is all about open doors, but there are still essentials which bind us together. It shouldn't be a theological free for all.

The early church in Acts 15 was facing a similar situation in having to decide between legalism and theological free for all. Last week we saw James make a decision for the mother

church in relationship to the gentile church in Antioch. Circumcision is not an essential. That was a big deal because it was the mark of the covenant. But we read in vs.28 that the church did not want to impose on the gentiles any further burden than the essentials.

Four essentials are listed here, three that deal with food and the kosher rules that were in place within the Jewish community and the fourth had to do with barring sexual relations outside of marriage. So they came up with essentials as a church that would have been far more palatable and doable than the act of circumcision. Plus, you have baptism take the place of circumcision sometime around the time when this took place.

But notice how all of this is set up, how they arrive at making this decision. It all begins in vs.24 with an apology from the leadership that certain persons have gone out from us and they have said things that have disturbed you and have unsettled your minds. They said things that we did not approve and that we did not send them out to say. But they did damage in our name.

We are sorry, we made a mistake. This should not have happened. Apologizing, recognizing that you are wrong is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign of strength and security. If you cannot admit that you are wrong, then you are insecure. The apostles demonstrate that the Gospel has given them the resources to confront controversy without being destroyed by it.

They do so here by apologizing and moving on. Leadership requires the ability to see your own faults before you pick out the faults in others. The early church was able to do that and so as a result they were able to send a message to the gentile church of Antioch which may have been expecting and preparing itself for a confrontation.

As we read in vs.31 the people of the church rejoiced in the message and were uplifted by the message sent by the denomination, by Judas and Silas. As a result the community was encouraged and continued to grow.

One of my primary messages over these years is the need for open doors, literally and figuratively in this church. But our identity, our fundamental identity as children of God is important. Openness is a part of our common identity here at FPC. But we must have other things which define us. Love of God and love of neighbor. Today we saw the 6 great ends of the church which is another unifying feature of who we are. Much is expected of us. Church is not about cruising through life but rather about making life worth living as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Amen.