

My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. God of our Epiphany dreams and realities in this Kingdom, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, Our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Our text might distract us from the real issue it's addressing for us today. It's the 21st century, and we sure don't issue edicts on purity codes of body and soul anymore, at least not in the UCC. But the church is dividing over whose righteousness matters more, and what the new Christians need to attend to more and which they can keep. It's kind of what we've been talking about in most of the Gospel of Matthew: Jesus wants us to be all in. And the two things he wants are for us to love God and pursue God's truth. And the way to do that in the world is to praise God first for all that we are and all that is, and to love our neighbor as God loves us.

No hall passes on these. None at all.

The divisions of doctrine and practice in this first-century church in Corinth are kind of the same struggles we have today: how we treat each other, and whether we can forgive and forebear one another's differences. We have to value the lives of our fellow church members better if we are to do God's calling in the world.

The issues themselves of worldly pursuit are not the core of the problem, however are they? With our differences in temperments, personalities, backgrounds, and opinions, it is quite easy to get pretty offended pretty quick if we expect things to go our way all the time. And that's particularly true in church, where we have all committed not to pursue the ways of the world where we just give someone the what-for or the finger and walk away when we've had enough or have a dispute.

Oh, but wait, we're disciples of Christ, and we live out Jesus' teachings in the world as the key to peaceful and joyful living, right?

I said, RIGHT? (Amen)

OK. At this year's annual meeting, it was noted that revitalization was losing its mojo, that we weren't feeling as connected one to another. The early church felt this way, too, but it required them to engage in critical self-reflection first before anything else.

That would require us to go back to the Jesus maxim of loving God, God's ways, and our neighbors. And that's where we're stuck.

We are not all that serious about knowing our neighbors in the next pew, and when we don't enter into people's lives, it's easy to take them for granted. Such as when they stop attending...do we inquire after them? Or complain to the Pastor as if it's their job to chase after each lost sheep? How much do we care about someone who's not in our group? And don't tell me we don't have groups here.

They ARE present. Some impenetrable. And they begin to share stories and secrets. That's where the trouble really starts.

We begin to see each other not through God's eyes of compassion and mercy, but through our own group's eyes of justice and righteousness. We don't forgive freely, and we sure as heck don't forget when we've been wronged. If I had a nickel for each time I've heard about something someone did when Pastor Gail or Mark Siefried or Betsy Waters or Pastor Shayna was here I'd be retired. But it also says that we not only don't forget, but we're going to tell everyone within earshot about it and prove our own righteous frame of the incident and people involved.

We don't forgive freely. The Bible says a couple of things about forgiveness. First, we forgive not 7 times, but 7 x 77 times. No escape clause here. It says we must forgive, and to try and try and try again. And please don't keep score until the 539th time.

When we see a speck in our neighbor's eye, it's the log that's reflected in our own. In other words, we project and find in others what we hate in ourselves, which is usually quite a problem, and what the Bible calls sin. We learned that in school, but somehow our adult brains erased it. God's truth speaks well here, and we would do well to attend to it.

Last, the Lord's prayer asks us God to forgive OUR trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. We want God's favor but we don't extend that to others? Is that God's way? We are all broken seeking wholeness, and we are called to figure out how to heal ourselves and others together.

My friend Richard Rohr, who talks a lot about love, says we have three large fears that keep us from true discipleship, either as an individual, a church, or both.

The first is the fear of failure. We can't possibly forgive 536 times, can we? So why don't we turn God's rule around to the other

person and blame them for not meeting our expectations, our wants, our perceptions of what's right and true and just and loving? Who has time for God when we're so right about the cause of things when they're out of whack?

The second is the fear of being unloved. We have all been broken-hearted and we would do ANYTHING to avoid that feeling, right? It's awful. But it's also necessary to our being, because if we don't love completely we are not all-in, as Jesus taught us. When we give half-heartedly to love to avoid being rejected, we can very quickly go to the blame game as our first option because we weren't all that invested in the first place. When we love...God, each other, whatever...it is so very hard not to try again, forgive, and forebear faults and differences.

The third is the fear of losing control, and this one may be the biggest one of all. We spend an inordinate amount of time trying to

make certain of everything in our world is just so and according to how WE want and expect it. Don't believe it? Try giving away ties to something important to you. Cooking, finances, child-rearing, housework, car repair, cleaning—just give away control over how you might do something and see if you don't soon try to control the process again or start criticizing results, no matter how promising. Now try turning over life to God. Or try apologizing to a friend for the 386th time. Or risk anger of someone by admitting betrayal of a trust or confidence rather than trying to control the situation by lying and covering up.

We have so much trouble facing these fears. But until we do—until we spend the time to find in ourselves the will and freedom to fail, be alone, and give control to others in most aspects of our lives, we have no chance. We have no chance of living the discipleship that Christ calls us to live, and we will keep blaming others around us for our lack of joy.

We will point to others as the reason for the dysfunction. We will not forgive because we cannot bear to be unloved ourselves, and so we project isolation and that un-love-ability onto others whom we have chosen by our group from a long-ago remembered time.

It is when we cannot dare to admit that we have seen the enemy and it is us that we are in trouble here, and we start to feel a malaise. It's easy to look at problems and name them as the fault of others, but the bigger challenge is to find ourselves in the midst and ask, how are each of us contributing to the larger problem we feel? If we are to become a community church, we need to make progress on all these things in the here and now, both individually and as a group called to authentic discipleship.

I'll leave you with these final thoughts. We have to face our fears before our angels of grace can be effective. Jesus doesn't say we can pick and choose forgiveness of some

but not others—Jesus says forgive freely as Jesus loved us. That’s the point and the promise of the cross, and price of sitting here doing church. The yoke is easy, however, and the burden is light if we believe God’s message throughout the Bible to Be Not Afraid. Fear is banished in God’s love, and church teaches that so much more than the world. So let’s do church and God’s love in these walls, and renew our commitment to discipleship. To do otherwise demeans our own calling and God’s message.

The choice is ours, friends, and for that, thanks be to God, Amen.