

“A Culture of Discipline”

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(1 Corinthians 8:1-13)

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

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In the annals of troubled churches, Corinth receives Hall of Fame recognition. Paul has received a written report of a mountain of problems in the church. Yet as the problems pile up in the church at Corinth, Paul focuses on two major thoughts: Jesus is Lord and the church should be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

1 Corinthians 8 deals with church members arguing over whether to eat meat offered to idols. This is not a vegetarian vs. meat-eaters show down at the biblical version of the O.K. Corral. A Christian would go to market to get some steak, only to find that the beef had been dedicated at a pagan rite. Some church members said, “There’s nothing wrong with the meat.” But other church members were outraged. “I’m not eating meat dedicated to a pagan god. Idolatry!”

So that’s the biblical context. Now, since “discipline” is a nasty word capable of causing Baptists to break out in hives, you are right to ask, “Preacher, what are you talking about?” Well, I’m not talking about “discipline” which kicks people out of church or disfellowships churches from the association.

The Georgia Baptist Convention plans to throw FBC of Decatur out of their convention. Why? Because the senior pastor is a woman: The Rev. Julie Pennington-Russell. That’s not discipline; that’s spiritual abuse.

Some pastors have church members shunned and their names removed from the church rolls if they disagree with or question the pastor. They claim that church members are sinning through questioning. That’s not pastoral authority but pastoral arrogance.

Let’s consider a creative discipline for the church. Paul says, “You have Christ and you have the church.” Get your mind off meat sacrificed to idols and stop thinking that you have more knowledge than others. Even if your knowledge is right, and you have the truth, if you get all puffed up and superior acting, it negates your knowledge. Build a culture of discipline based on love, humility, mutual respect, the Lordship of Christ, and the common good of the community.

Imagine a voluntary culture of discipline at First Baptist Church that is positive, relational and encouraging. **A disciplined approach to our practices is what I’m asking of you.** And that’s more than suggestions on Yellow Cards. You are invited to join us in a discipline that will evaluate every worship service, every ministry, and every program to make sure we are moving toward perfection. The church has to bring the same discipline to worship that a violinist brings to her craft, that a ballet dancer brings to her performance, that a singer brings to her music, that a teacher brings to her lessons, that a baseball player brings to his sport – this is the discipline we need. A discipline that asks, “Is this good for us?” A discipline that asks, “Will this help us grow?” A discipline that asks, “Will this empower us?” Not “Do we like it?” Children ask “Do we like it?”

Let's focus our discipline on the primary practice of the Christian faith – our worship. Here's the deal: Worship requires **the acquisition of complex skills**. Stanley Hauerwas says, "Christianity is the name given that company who have learned from one another the skills necessary for the worship of God. So the skills required to worship well are not separable from the company itself."

Now, it follows that **any skill requires practice**. When we pray daily, read Scripture regularly, especially the psalms, we gain skill that will make Sunday the most important day of our week. Why do I mention the psalms? In the psalms the real world and the world of worship meet – the voice of protest and anger and the voice of praise and thanksgiving (The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams). I feel a tension and a reluctance in our worship, as if we would be unwilling to worship with Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Or Psalm 22:22: "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." "Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me" (35:1). "But as for me, when [my enemies] were sick, I prayed with my head bowed as though I grieved for a friend or a brother" (35:13, 14). "Have mercy on me, O God, blot out my transgressions and cleanse me from my sin" (51:1, 2).

Perhaps our worship is too one-dimensional. How can we deal with the anger that wells up in our hearts over family issues and work issues if all we do in church is offer up plastic praise to a plastic Jesus? How do we dump the frustrations of a tough week unless we offer protest as well as praise? Lament and laughter? Applause and amen? The actual practices of life should intersect our worship.

And part of that practice is **respect** for the worship of God. Pat Summit, women's basketball coach at the University of Tennessee, describes the coach's primary teaching as "respect the game." When players were lollygagging in practice or not focusing at the free throw line, the word was "Respect the game." Bring your A game to every practice. "Respect our worship."

Reading and hearing the Word of God, for example, takes the discipline of practice – reading the text across decades of inquiry and study. When we read the Scripture in church we worship with those who made the Scripture possible. There's John Wycliffe – "the Morning Star of the Reformation," translating the Vulgate into English. There's Gutenberg and his printing press clanging out the Bible in the language of the people. And William Tyndale burned at the stake for producing an English translation of the Bible. Our discipline of reading validates the discipline of those who gave everything that we might have a Bible to read in church.

And there's no way around it: Practice means **repetition**. "I love you" never becomes boring in a world as loveless as ours. Dr. Harold Mixon was my classical rhetoric professor in graduate school. Every morning as I passed his office at 7:30, he would be sitting at his desk poring over Aristotle's *Rhetoric* in the Greek text. He told me that he had been reading the text for more than forty years. And it showed in his doctoral seminars as he shared the riches he had garnered from all those years of faithful study.

I am surprised when we complain about repetition in church when our lives are stitched together by repetition at home, at work, and at play. As a boy, I shot free throws every day after school. I shot until I made 100 free throws. That repetition was not boring or tiring because each new day was a new challenge. And people who receive communion every Sunday come to the table of the Lord hungry and thirsty. Not as monotony but as miracle.

So guess what? We church types have been called into a culture of discipline where we practice our craft, our primary art form which is ,the worship of God. And the acquisition of the skills required for worship takes a lifetime of immersion in prayer and Scripture, as well as openness to the persuasion of the Holy Spirit. It will be Sunday again soon, so practice, practice, practice.