

Our Guiding Values – Part I

1st John 1:1-4

CWZepp, BWCOB, April 8, 2018

If you have read your April newsletter – which I am confident you all diligently did as soon as it arrived in your mailboxes – you know that today we are starting a 4-week sermon series focusing on the guiding values of our congregation. These values were articulated as part of the Vision, Mission, and Values statement that was unanimously adopted by our Congregational Council in August of 2013. Every week, this statement of our identity is named on the front of our bulletin inserts. But as is often the case, even things that are prominently displayed eventually fade into the background when they are repeated and occupy the same space over time.

So, after five years, we felt the time was right to revisit these statements and explore whether they still articulate who we are as a family of faith and whether they still speak to God's call in our life together. Moreover, while the short versions of these values are featured in our weekly bulletins, many of you are aware that we also adopted a significantly longer expanded version of these values. But unless you are new to our congregation and have been exploring our website to learn who we are and what we are all about, or you have for some reason taken the time look them up recently, chances are you haven't thought much about these longer statements of our values in recent years.

Thus, here we are. Today we begin with the first of our four stated values. In your bulletin, you will find it in its full, expanded version as an insert, which I invite you to pull out now if you'd like (*allow time for doing so*). I know that most of us can read this for ourselves, but for the benefit of those who can't or would rather not [as well for those who might be tuning in via television down at the retirement community] I would like to read them aloud now. Feel free to follow along...

Our Guiding Values – Part I

***We value sharing life together
and including all persons in our common life.***

To that end we:

- Strive for the inclusion and acceptance of all persons without exception, holding in love our relationships with one another and with God*
- Bear each other's burdens; celebrate joy, grace, and mercy; give and receive forgiveness in the messiness of life*
- Affirm that relationships matter*
- Recognize that we live in a world created by God and shared with others*
- Practice peace-building and pursue the things that make for peace*
- Live as faithful and generous stewards of the Earth, our resources, and our relationships*

Now I want stop there, and offer a little bit of commentary. Because each of our other values in their expanded forms read very much like this one, with a stated value and a number of specific implications of that value. However, in the discernment process that led to the creation and adoption of this statement, it became clear that something additional needed to be said relative to our vision of being an inclusive church, principally because the Christian church in both its historic and contemporary forms has not been known for being a welcoming and inclusive group. If anything, we are known today for being the opposite. And so as we explored how to fully articulate this value, we settled on a confessional addendum, which is the paragraph at the bottom of your insert. It reads thus:

We seek to be a community of faith that welcomes and includes all persons in our shared life together. Yet we recognize that our collective history and human imperfection has marginalized some in the past and causes some to question the sincerity of our welcome and inclusion in the present. Therefore, we name the following for ourselves and for others: We value, love, and want to share life with persons of all theological, cultural and life backgrounds. We affirm our identities as children of God and embrace the diversity of our racial, ethnic, gender identities and sexual orientations. We welcome those of diverse relationships, social and family statuses. We embrace those of varying relationships with God, educational levels, physical and mental abilities, ages, and economic circumstances. We include conscientious objectors, those who serve and have served in the military, and persons of all political and ideological persuasions. We share our lives in all their joy and messiness as we live, grow, serve, and love together.

It was this last line in particular that reminded me of the *Cheers* theme song that is highlighted in our bulletin today. Now, truth be told – I am currently in the midst of cycling through the full *Cheers* catalog on Netflix, so the connection didn't just occur to me out of nowhere. But that line – *we share our lives in all their joy and messiness as we live, grow, serve, and love together* – could quite easily have been written about the gang at *Cheers*. In their time, the shared trials and triumphs of Sam and Diane, Carla, Cliff and Norm, Frasier, Coach, and Woody exemplified the yearning for community, connection, and belonging of their era. *Cheers* wasn't a community of faith, but it *was* a community that shared life together, and ultimately (whether they liked it or not) included just about everybody who wandered through their doors.

While it is only a TV series, *Cheers* is symbolic of something deeply significant about the need for human community. Theologian Alister McGrath writes that the immense success of *Cheers*, which ran for 11 seasons and 271 episodes from 1982 through 1993, “centered on the strong sense of community it created.” He continues:

The bar was a place of small talk and smart talk, of refuge and welcome, in which everybody knew you. Outside the bar was a crowd of indistinct, unidentified people. But inside, you were a special person. You mattered to others. You belonged somewhere. The theme song...captured this perfectly: you want to be somewhere “where everybody knows your name.”¹

It may be that since the advent of the television sitcom in America, every generation has had its archetypal example of this kind of community of chance and choice, a fictional group of kindred spirits sharing life together in all its joy and messiness. For me and my

¹ Alister McGrath. *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith*. (2012) p. 153.

contemporaries, it was *Friends*. For the generation before mine, it was *Cheers*. I am told that it was Mayberry of *The Andy Griffith Show* for the generation before that. Today, it is probably *The Big Bang Theory*. What all these shows have in common is their affirmation of the goodness of belonging together, sharing life through all its joys and sorrows, ups and downs. In this affirmation, they resonate with the depths of the human experience, and they give voice to the deep human yearning to belong somewhere – to be accepted and to be wanted.

We all need a place to belong. We all need a community where everybody knows our name. Back in 1949, the French philosopher Simone Weil wrote in her book *The Need for Roots* about the importance of communities in anchoring personal identity. She said, “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.”²

This need has perhaps become even more acute in our contemporary culture, where the decline of involvement in traditional face-to-face community engagement and in-person social networks like civic groups, volunteer organizations and fraternal societies, as well as nearly all religious groups and churches, particularly among the younger generations, is widely documented. Sociologist Robert Putnam published a now classic thesis detailing this decline in his influential book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* in 2001.³ Now, some blame technology and its potential for more isolating kinds of entertainment and interaction. While I don’t necessarily want to argue this point, I do want to suggest that our yearning for belonging is not new to our technologically saturated culture. Theologian Walter Brueggemann wrote in 1977 that “the sense of being lost, displaced, and homeless is pervasive in contemporary culture.”⁴ Remember that was 1977 – the year before I was born. He continues, “the yearning to belong somewhere, to be in a safe place, is a deep and moving pursuit.”⁵

In fact, the rise of social media is likely just another manifestation in a long line of human efforts to create community and share life through meaningful connections with other human beings. This past year, with a nod to Robert Putnam, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg noted in a speech, “It’s striking that for decades, membership in all kinds of groups has declined by as much as one-quarter. That’s a lot of people who now need to find a sense of purpose and support somewhere else.”⁶ For Zuckerberg, of course, that somewhere else is Facebook, which he sees as a postmodern, post-traditional form of “church.” He quotes research by, among others, Arthur Brooks of the American Enterprise Institute, in suggesting that “people who go to church are more likely to volunteer and give to charity—not just because they’re religious, but because they’re part of a community.”⁷

We could spend a lot of time debating the merits of this comparison of Facebook to a church. But for the moment, I simply want to lift out the conclusion implicit in Zuckerberg’s comments – for good or ill, Facebook is one of the places to which people are turning today in order to fulfill that need for belonging and community. And as such, one might suggest as Zuckerberg seems to be doing, that such community is –in and of itself – a good thing.

² Simone Weil. *The Need for Roots: prelude towards a declaration of duties towards mankind*. p. 41.

³ Simon and Schuster, 2001.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann. *The Land*. p.1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mark Bauerlein. “Facebook as church.” *First Things*. July 3, 2017. Online: <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/07/facebook-as-church>

⁷ Ibid.

But to what end? And for what purpose? That is the final question I would like to engage with you today, and to do so, I want to switch gears and return to our scripture reading for this morning. The few verses that Paul read for us a few minutes ago comprise what is typically considered the “prologue” of the first letter of John. As such, it serves an introduction and foundation for the letter – stating the goal and the purpose of what follows. Here, in a few short sentences, the author concisely reveals the motivation for writing on behalf of the Johannine community: As firsthand witnesses to the gospel, they share in the experience of communion with the divine, and they want others to experience it too. Sharing that experience of communion with the “infinite Life of God” will, as the *NRSV* puts it, make their joy complete.⁸

Speaking of joy, I can’t tell you how much joy it brought Jeff and I when we were talking about doing this sermon series, trying to figure out when it would be a good time to engage these values, and we decided to look up the lectionary scriptures for these first few weeks after Easter just to see if any of them related in any ways to our values. What did we find? A virtual cornucopia of resonance in these readings from 1st John. We couldn’t have picked better scriptures in which to ground our values if we were proof-texting!

But that is beside the point. What I really want to draw your attention to this morning is one little word found here in these few verses at the beginning of 1st John. In the original Greek, it is “*koinonia*.” In the *NRSV* of our pew Bibles it is “fellowship.” In *The Message* paraphrase that Paul read for us, it is “communion.” In the language of our stated value for today, it would be “sharing life together and including all persons in our common life.” For the author of 1st John, the desire to share the joy of *koinonia* was the stated reason for writing his letter. It would probably not be too big of a stretch to say that it encapsulates the very purpose of the church.

Because unlike Facebook or *Cheers* or whatever other collective to which we might turn to fulfill our deep need for community, the church offers something even more profound – the opportunity to share in the divine life embodied in Christ. The life of Jesus, this “font of the community’s tradition, to whom the church bears witness and in whom the church finds the springs for its continued existence,”⁹ is shared in Christian community. “This one in whom indestructible life was tangibly revealed....at a precise moment in history, molds the...vision of those who currently testify to that life as eternally significant.”¹⁰

It is with good reason that John Wesley located Christian fellowship at the center of 1st John’s “apparent aim”, “to confirm the happy and holy communion of the faithful with God and Christ, by describing the marks of that blessed state.”¹¹ Simply put, sharing life together in Christian *koinonia* is the continuing proclamation of the Easter story. It does not exist for itself, but it is itself proof of God’s continuing activity through Christ. It is not an end in and of itself, but rather, like the prologue of 1st John, a beginning – a starting point for experiencing the continuing life of the risen Christ.

And so it is with sermons. My hope in exploring this topic this morning is not to offer the last word, but rather to begin our collective thinking together about the nature of our fellowship; to “prime the pump” if you will, and to offer a starting point for our continuing reflection on what it

⁸ 1st John 1:4

⁹ *The New Interpreter’s Bible*. Vol. XII. p 382.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p 382-383.

¹¹ John Wesley. *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*. (1755) p 902.

means for us to be *an inclusive community of faith seeking to follow Jesus and live the love of God*, specifically one that values *sharing life together and including all persons in our common life*.¹²

To that end, I want to conclude by extending an invitation to each of you. About a month ago, the Witness and Nurture Commission began their meeting by looking at the very same guiding value on which we are focusing today. Our leader invited us to consider each of the specific implications named in the bulleted list, and then think about a moment that we saw this value in evidence in our life together as a congregation – a “snapshot” if you will, of this value being lived out in our day-to-day, week-to-week, life together. We then went around and each shared a moment or two that stood out in our memories. For instance, I shared about the time that I was a visiting candidate for the pastoral position I now hold, and remembered watching the ushers come down the aisle of the sanctuary to collect the offering. As I recall, it was 7 guys in suits, much as you would typically expect for a group of ushers. But what I remember most was that right in the middle of them was a young Kyle Remnant, clad in shorts, sneakers, and a T-shirt and proudly sporting a “white-boy ‘fro.” I remember thinking at that moment that this was a place I could belong.

That sharing in the Witness and Nurture Commission was wonderfully refreshing and encouraging. And we want to extend the invitation to each of you to share your own “snapshot” of this value being lived out among us. So back to those inserts – you may have noticed that they are blank on the back. We would like to invite you to use that blank space to share how you see us living out this value together. It could be a picture or a poem, a symbol or a story or just a few scattered thoughts. You can sign it if you wish, or you could leave it anonymous. But we would love for each of you to share something. If you are finished by the time the offering is collected, you can drop your “snapshot” in the offering plate as it goes by. Or you can leave it in one of the collection bins at the back of the sanctuary before you leave today. We’ll then collect them all, and find some way of displaying them in the coming days so that we can all share in the joy of these recollections. I don’t know that it will make “our joy complete,” but it should certainly be fun and hopefully encouraging and enlightening.

Because I am convinced that we offer something more significant here than simply providing another place “where everybody knows your name,” though I do think that is an important part of our collective identity. But even more importantly, we share in the divine *koinonia*, a communion of saints and sinners where the infinite life of God takes shape before us and among us, where God is found precisely because we come together and are bound together in love. May it ever be so...

Benediction

What better sending could we offer than this:

Bless'd be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love.

Go in the peace and joy of koinonia!

(and don't forget to share those snapshots! ☺)

¹² BWCob Vision, Mission, and Values Statement. Adopted at congregational council August 25, 2013. Available online: <http://bwcob.org/about-us/vision-identity/>