

BIBLICALLY FAITHFUL & RADICALLY LOVING

The Discipleship Vision of Christ Church

Text: John 8:2-11

As we prepare to come together to the Lord's Table today, I want to take a moment to reflect with you about where we are as a church family and about the most cherished beliefs of our Christian faith. Most of you are aware that I stirred up our family and sparked considerable discussion about our beliefs this past July when I extended the sacrament of baptism to a same-sex married person and the little child of such a marriage. The congregational clamor was immediate – some decrying the act as a failure of biblical faithfulness and others celebrating it as a witness to Jesus-like love. Hundreds of you wrote or spoke to me and our elders, trustees, and staff, and I want to thank every one of you who took the time to do that. No pastor can help but be grateful to be reminded how deeply his congregation treasures the Bible and is passionate about being a community of love.

Over the past two months, our church's leadership has searched the scriptures, prayed, listened, and talked in an effort to come to some unity about how we believe God would have us respond in the future to the many complex pastoral situations that life today brings across our doorstep. We sensed that we are in a defining moment as a church and in our wider culture. So we really took our time to go before God and seek His will and way. Thank you for your patience with this process.

What has emerged from this discernment is a refreshed vision of what we believe it means to be a Christian disciple and a disciple-making Church. We sent out by email this past week a document that summarizes our vision. You can pick up a printed copy today or view it online. In a nutshell, we are taking one step back and two steps forward. We have hit the reset button on our baptismal policy, returning to our church's longstanding practice prior to that day in July – a practice that is consistent with two millennia of Christian history and the vast majority of churches worldwide today. But we are also taking two steps forward into some vital new territory. First, we want to challenge ourselves and you to renew our vision of what it looks like to be more **biblically faithful** in the way we live our lives. And, secondly, we are asking you to join us in building a church culture that is more **radically loving** of all kinds of people than we've been before. Let me say more about those two ideas.

One of the most important things that happened within my heart and that of our church's leadership over the past two months has been a humble awakening to all of the ways that our lives are still out of step with the Bible's teaching. It's easy to focus on certain visible sins in other people. But our main job, says Jesus, is to address ourselves. Whether it is gossiping, or failing to care for the Temple of the Holy Spirit, or using our resources in selfish ways while millions of Christ's brothers and sisters live in extreme poverty, we realized how much confessing and repenting we still have to do.

In our Discipleship Vision, we've sought to spell out a picture of the kind of character

and conduct the Bible says that God seeks to shape in all of us. This vision goes way beyond sexual practices and toward a much more holistic understanding of the beautiful life God wants for us all.

For 2,000 years, the Christian Church has understood the sacrament of **baptism** as being about pursuing that kind of life. I know that's not necessarily the primary understanding of baptism some of us hold. Some of us have been raised to think of baptism as a sacrament necessary for salvation, or as a ritual celebrating God's unconditional love for people. This is why, I think, it feels so unloving to think that our church wouldn't baptize everyone who wants to be – especially innocent kids.

The Bible teaches, however, that admission to heaven does not at all depend on someone being baptized. Salvation depends solely on someone's relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Jesus himself made it absolutely clear that God already feels relationally connected to children (Matthew 18:1-5; 19:13-14). There's not a child of a gay family or a straight family or without a family that Jesus and any church that follows Jesus doesn't already love and accept. Jesus said: "**Let the little children come unto me and hinder them not because the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these**" (Matt. 19:13-15). In other words, kids are in until or if they grow up and decide to walk out.

The sacrament of baptism, however, is not primarily about God's love for us; but about our love for God and our desire to have ourselves or our children's lives conformed to His character. I got a bit cloudy on this for a moment this summer but see it more clearly now. When we baptize somebody, we certainly reiterate Christ's desire to have everyone possible drawn into the circle of God's love. But that is not the central meaning or purpose of baptism. Throughout the scriptures and the life of the early church, baptism was viewed as a sacrament of repentance and commitment to a new kind of life. The continual call of the early church was "**repent and be baptized**" (Acts 2:38). The very process of going under the water and coming up again is an image of being washed clean or of dying to the old self and being raised to a new self.

From the earliest days of the Christian Church, those being baptized (or the believing parents of children) made a pledge to turn from what God calls sin and toward a Christ-like life, empowered by the Holy Spirit and the help of the Church. In the early church, prospective disciples went through a year-long period of education and reflection on what they were really getting themselves into before they were baptized on Easter.

As we move forward here, we want to do a better job of helping anyone who is exploring baptism or membership think through what it is they are really getting themselves into. Our Discipleship Vision statement is our effort to paint that picture of what we believe being **biblically faithful** really means.

We've been asked in recent days: "Is Christ Church going to deny baptism to somebody simply because of some particular sin in their life?" That would be both hypocritical and crazy, because we've all got our own stubborn and unrepentant sins. But the question

suggests a misunderstanding. Baptism and membership – and the two go together in our tradition – are not some special privilege or status the church denies. They are voluntary acts of commitment a person makes. I'll be honest. I wouldn't pursue baptism or membership in a church who defined sin in terms I didn't agree with or whose picture of Christian character wasn't one that I was at least willing to attempt to pursue. Christ Church isn't trying to keep anybody out. We just want to know, given our vision of discipleship – and what the Scriptures call you to turn away from and toward – do you truly want in?

One of my favorite stories of Jesus is the one we read from John's Gospel today. It ends with Jesus saying to a woman who'd been caught in the act of adultery: **"Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11)**. Adultery was commonplace in the ancient world. It's been well-documented that in first century Roman society, most people accepted the idea of recreational sex on the side. But in the Ten Commandments, God had said, don't go there: **"Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Exo. 20)**. Even if it seems harmless or is accepted by others, it's not what I want for my people. So, in a biblically faithful way, Jesus challenged this woman to turn away from her practice.

What is sometimes missed, however, is what Jesus did BEFORE he said that to her. In the sentence that comes right ahead of it, Christ says: **"I don't condemn you" (John 8:11)**. The Greek word rendered "condemn" there is the word katakrinein – which refers to a damning judgment of someone – a writing off of their life on the basis of some act or attribute of it. Jesus does not do that with anyone in this life. He doesn't view our value in terms of one dimension of our life or dismiss us because of where we are on the journey today. Jesus is most interested in who with His help we can become.

The Bible calls Jesus **"a friend of sinners" (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34)**. And those weren't just words. Jesus wasn't just polite to imperfect people. He didn't simply hold His nose and tolerate them. He was willing to lay down His life for them. In the story we read in John 8, Jesus puts His body between a rock-wielding lynch mob and a woman whose life was deeply out of alignment with God's best desires for her. This story is so important because it is a pointer to the ultimate story of the Bible – the one to which this Table we're about to come to also points. Jesus put His body between OUR life and the weight of the final katakrinein that sin deserves. WE are that woman caught in adultery. We are doing all kinds of stuff that is accepted in the world but more out of alignment with God's best desires for us than we even know. It's why Jesus prays: **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34)**.

There's a term for this kind of self-sacrificing, other-prizing behavior. Our staff and elders call it being **radically loving**. I know some are thinking that we're not really radically loving others if we're not doing their baptisms. But do you know that Jesus never baptized anyone? Is there any doubt in your mind that HE loved people radically? So how did Jesus show His love for people? He walked with them, listened to them, ate with them, fed them, healed them, challenged them, protected them, instructed them, laid His hands on them, prayed for them and sacrificed for them. That's what Jesus-like love looks like. That's what our elders and staff envision Christ Church renewing its

commitment to doing for everybody we can – LGBTQ or straight, conservative or progressive, young or old. Whether you or your loved ones choose to commit yourself to our Discipleship Vision or simply enjoy the friendship of Christ Church, please know this: YOU matter to us. We want to know you and journey with you. YOU belong here.

Many years ago, I knew a drug-abusing, fornicating, suicide-contemplating, young adult who could not even conceive of surrendering his attitudes, actions or appetites to God or attending a church. But some devoted disciples reached out and befriended him. They met him with a radical love he'd never experienced before. They welcomed him into their circle. They patiently taught him the biblical truths in which they believed. And in that circle of belonging and believing, that young man began to believe and to become someone new. Whatever happened to that guy? He's standing here right now in front of you – proclaiming the transforming power of the Holy Spirit and the gospel of Jesus Christ to you!

All across the worldwide communion of the Church of Jesus today, there are stories like this being told or stories like this underway, or stories like this that need to begin. Our world needs this Church, its Story and its Communion. It needs to believe and see that genuine transformation of human character and human community is truly possible.

You know what's happening in our world today. Disconnected from God, disfigured by sin, and distracted by a thousand idols, our world has become increasingly angry, materialistic, power-grabbing, anxious, addicted and hopeless. Divided falsely into black and white, red and blue, gay and straight, us and them, MeToo and UseYou, we have lost sight of our brothers and sisters. We have come to care more about being right with our tribe than being righteous in the eyes of God. We have forgotten the wonder and gift of human life in all its fragility, inter-dependence and glory.

But God has not forgotten us. And so Jesus bids us, "Come. Come today to my Table. Come commune here with Me. I will help you remember who you are and who you can become. I will fill you with the grace and truth you need to transform." You don't have to be perfect to come to the Table of our Lord. You don't have to be a member of this church. You simply need to be sorry for your sins... and put your trust for your salvation not in your goodness but in the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice on the cross... and resolve that you will seek to live in obedience to Him.

So, come to the Table of our Lord and find the grace and truth you need – until that coming day when Christ returns to make all things new.