

Credible Witnesses?

John 13:34-35

³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Pittsburgh Presbytery gets mentioned in local media more often than in most regions, because, as they say, Presbyterians are denser here than anywhere else in America. Presbyterian news is deemed by the media to be of more interest here than in most places. So what are we publicly known for?

I wish it were for the unintended message conveyed by the Post-Gazette when it ran a front-page story about my call as the new leader of our presbytery, headlined, "Pittsburgh Presbytery Welcomes New Leader." And immediately beside the headline was a picture of Jim Cavaziel, most famous as the face of Jesus in "The Passion of the Christ." My picture got relegated to the back page, where the story continued. Would that our presbytery be renowned for following Jesus!

Instead, a run through news archives shows our main public story is about our disputes and divisions. Media coverage twelve years ago of our most acerbic departure, Memorial Park Church, was the most extended. We were in the news again with subsequent departures of other large congregations, each time highlighting the disputes that led to these departures. We got lots of ink and airtime when the pathway for full ministry inclusion of persons without regard to sexuality was opened up 8 years ago, triggering memories of similar coverage 40 years earlier when Pittsburgh became the focal point of disputes over women's ordination in the trial of one of our ministers, Wynn Kenyon. In both cases, Pittsburgh Presbyterians were publicly profiled as people whose disagreements with each other led us to break fellowship.

We also get public notice for stances we take on controversial issues, such as gun control, immigration, racial profiling and fossil fuels. The point is this: the world takes notice of us, for better or for worse.

It did the same with the early Christian movement, without the benefit of mass media. The earliest church historian, Tertullian, tells the story of how a tiny group of Jesus-followers from a remote corner of the Roman Empire became a worldwide movement. The key to Christianity's growth, he said, was the Roman world's amazement at Christians' behavior, not their teachings. "See how they love each other!" they exclaimed. "None of them is left in need, for they care for one another." People yearned to be part of this stark contrast to the ways of the surrounding world, where everyone had to fend for themselves, some enjoying great wealth while other suffered abject poverty.

The sixth “Great End” of the church, in our *Book of Order*, is “the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.” It’s all about how the world sees us. It is the key to our credibility as those who witness to the saving life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

This is how the outside world will know that you are truly my disciples – by how you love one another. So says Jesus. *How are we doing with that?*

Presbytery is a manifestation of the church that has a unique public role. Congregations are by their very nature homogeneous, gatherings of members who feel some strong affinity with each other. Whether by virtue of politics or social issues or theological conviction or ethnic commonality or economic class or worship styles, congregations draw some people and not others. With such natural affinities, it is hardly newsworthy when people find themselves able to be reconciled to each other within congregations. The real test of the Good News of reconciliation is how Jesus’ followers who *differ* across these lines that divide society live together. Can such differences, which destroy community in the world around us, be overridden by the love of God poured into us by the Holy Spirit who unites us to Christ?

This is where our life *as a presbytery* presents a golden opportunity for public witness to the Gospel. As a presbytery, we are a hodge-podge of congregations that stretch across the spectrums of socio-economic, ethnic, political, and theological convictions that ordinarily lead people to sequester themselves from each another.

Presbytery *could* be little more than an aggregation of disparate congregations that consider our relationship a burden of necessity. We *could* easily enough sit together at presbytery meetings then go back home and speak ill of one another — if not directly, then indirectly by disparaging each other’s commitments.

Or, we *could* be a community that genuinely loves each other, works *with* rather than *against* each other, holds each other in esteem even when we care about some very different things as congregations when we are apart.

The credibility of our proclamation of the gospel – the first “great end” of the church – hinges on the actuality of our public exhibition of the kingdom of heaven in our life together.

Jesus calls this commandment “new,” not because loving each other is a new commandment, but because it is specifically an invitation to his disciples to love each other *as Jesus loves us*. What does Jesus’ love of his disciples look like? It is honest, but never destructive or cruel. It is a commitment to unconditional companionship – never does Jesus abandon his companions, even when they abandon him. It revolves around the table constantly. It’s focused first of all on our relationship with each other, rather than on generic neighbors.

Jesus challenges us, as a presbytery, “Love one another as I have loved you.” I issue one modest invitation to us today, to respond as a presbytery by refraining from disparaging our sister congregations whose commitments may differ somewhat from our own. Most of our commitments

are shared, especially things that matter most. John Calvin's list of core commitments we cannot abandon is as good today as it was in the sixteenth century — God is One, Jesus is God, and God is merciful.

I ask us *not* to abandon our own subsidiary commitments, only to refrain from disparaging such commitments of other congregations.

I call this a "modest" invitation. But, actually, it is huge. How can we charitably differ in our commitments, for example, concerning inclusion of LGBT persons in our offices of ministry, without disparaging the integrity of those who see that differently from us? I am grateful to be part of a denomination that has the audacity to believe that we can be part of the same community of faith while holding different commitments on such matters. Are we up to it? *We must* be up to it, if we are to have any credibility in our proclamation of the gospel of reconciliation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

In an unprecedentedly polarized society, a presbytery has a wonderful opportunity to display a contrasting narrative of life together, showing the world that Jesus *does* make a difference within us and among us. Let's own up to the hard truth that we have a history of being known publicly for division and dispute, rather than love. And with God's help, let's change that story. For the sake of our Lord and his Gospel. Amen.