

What Does It Mean To Be A Loving Congregation?

Throughout the Scriptures, God calls us to love. In our baptisms, we are privileged recipients of God's saving love in Christ. And now, sent out as His redeemed people, we are called to love one another. "Love one another with brotherly affection" (Romans 12:10). "Owe no one anything except to love each other" (Romans 13:8). "Let all that you do be done in love" (1 Corinthians 16:14). "Let brotherly love continue" (Hebrews 13:1). "We love because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Yes, it's everywhere. We are called as God's people to love.

But how do we actually live this out? This is where it gets tricky. It's one thing to pursue love in general; it's another thing entirely to know what that looks like in specific day-to-day circumstances. For instance, when does love compel us to speak up? And what should we say? When should we give to someone? And when is it most loving to say "no"? How do we help one another without being judgmental? The questions are endless. And the answers require wisdom. Here, we must learn from Jesus. Before Him, we are all beginners—even the wisest among us. For us, the specifics of love are not always easy to discern.

And yet, nevertheless, the call remains. Therefore, I'd like to share a few thoughts, focusing on how we can be a loving congregation:

1) Love requires us to speak well

I could have begun in many different places, but I will start here because, in my experience, this is where we Christians fall short most of all. Indeed, James says, "No human being can tame the tongue" (James 3:8). And yet the fact remains: If we want to be a loving congregation, we must guard carefully our speech. "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29).

Our words are meant to build up, not tear down. So, first of all, we should be very careful not to talk about other people behind their backs. Did someone do something you don't agree with? Did someone offend you? Does someone frustrate you? Talk to them personally, rather than grumbling about them to others. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps you'll find that it was all a big misunderstanding. And likewise, we should avoid all gossip. A good rule of thumb is this: If you wouldn't want the person to overhear it, don't say it.

Instead, we should be gracious in our speech toward one another. Don't be rude. Don't be passive aggressive. Don't put one another down. Be kind. Be patient. Bear with one another's quirks. We should be sensitive to the feelings of others and aware of the fact that if anyone is the "chief sinner" it is "me" (1 Timothy 1:15). And yes, if we do say something hurtful or ungracious that is contrary to the spirit of Christ, we should be quick to apologize.

2) Love requires us to support one another well

Another facet of love is the obligation to support one another, in both faith and life.

This means, first of all, praying for one another. Are we doing this? Are we paying attention to the needs of those around us and tirelessly bringing them before the Lord? Are we praying for our fellow congregation members? Are we praying for our family and friends? Are we praying for our pastor and our teachers and our school? Are our pastors praying for their people? There is no greater act of love than to approach God on behalf of another. Nothing is impossible with Him. Who knows what great things He might do, if we would only ask (James 4:2)?

Similarly, we should be working to encourage one another in faith. We are all running the same race in Christ (Hebrews 12:1). If anyone stumbles or falls behind, we should be turning to lift them back up, not leaving them behind. This includes reaching out to those we haven't seen in a while, and getting to know those that attend a different service. This includes bringing words of comfort to those who are

hurting. And, yes, this includes rebuking sin in a spirit of humility and grace when that is necessary (Luke 17:3). This isn't just the job of the pastor. It's the job of the entire congregation.

And, even more, this means caring for one another's bodily needs. God has placed you here for them, and there are so many different ways we could live this out. We could offer to make meals for those who are facing troubles. We could offer to take up a collection for those who have experienced a tragedy. We could offer to help around the house for someone who is ill. Already we are doing these sorts of things in a number of ways. But we can always grow. Remember that believers in the early church even sold their land and possessions to care for the needy among them (Acts 2:45).

And I could certainly say more. I could talk about humility. I could talk about standing strong on Jesus' Word and confessing it boldly before the world. I could talk about remaining faithful to our various vocations from God and being steadfast in mission. I could talk about setting an example in life and faith and being patient in suffering. I could talk about welcoming visitors (which I hope to write more about soon). Love encompasses it all. But, for the sake of space, let me simply close with Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13: "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

My friends, we are loved unconditionally by God. He has given Jesus His Son to save us from our sins and, in Him, we are forgiven. This is all ours through faith, apart from any works. So then, having received His love, let us now love one another, "not in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18).

Pastor Aaron Vergin