

### Returning to the Core

Proverbs 10:9

Luke 6:32-36

According to a study done at Stanford University, watching violence does **not** make children or teens to behave more violently. It does, however, desensitize them to violence. This is why media become increasingly nasty over time. To get the same shock value they must provide ever more shock. A link in the study leads to a video from a current movie, The Hunt. In the clip an armed woman stands over another woman and asks, "Do you think you deserve mercy just because you're a girl?" The woman below says, "No." At which point the standing woman shoots her. I may be getting old, but I was raised with the ethic that girls and women **do** deserve protection from violence. More importantly, at church and in my family I was taught that all human beings deserve mercy. In direct opposition to what our culture pushes, Jesus preaches that we must love, do good and show mercy.

Our passage today comes from Luke's rendition of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. It directly follows his giving of the Golden Rule: "And as you wish that people would do to you, do so to them." Christianity stands on two pedestals. Remove either of them and the whole thing tumbles down. Those two pedestals are sound doctrine and action. Sound doctrine means correct teaching based on the Word of God. You already know what action means. In this section of his Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches a doctrine that can be hard to put into practice. Nevertheless, he calls us to

take action on it. Love. Do good. Show mercy.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?” Jesus asks. “If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that? Even sinners do the same.” The “sinners” label refers to the Jewish belief that those who follow the Laws of Moses reasonably well are not sinners. But Jesus says we're no better than those who make no attempt to follow his law. If we lend money only to make a profit on interest, if we snub those who snub us, if we fail to help the poor, we are most assuredly sinners.

We may laugh when a sister complains, “Why do I have to be nice to my brother when he's mean to me?” but that is exactly what Jesus calls us to do. The difference between a sibling spat and our obligation to afford **all** people love and mercy no matter how they treat us is a difference merely of scope, not type. In a church I previously served the member families had grown up together for generations. Over my seven years there I stumbled across many old grievances. A woman once told me, “These fine, upstanding Christian men all act so pious, but that didn't stop them from harassing me when we were in high school.” In her mind, to them she would always be the girl from the wrong side of the tracks. Pretty enough to kiss—and probably, more—but too socially unacceptable to take home to mother.

Make no mistake, this woman had a legitimate issue. No woman—nor man—deserves harassment. Jesus repeatedly demanded that his followers put the last, first. That woman came from one of the least families in that town, the poorest of the poor.

As a child of God she deserved more love and mercy than she received. **Jesus calls upon us to love and to show mercy without regard for who the objects of our attention are.** His command that we love, do good and show mercy has no conditions. Just as his love is unconditional. Just as his mercy has no end.

Today we address a core principle of Christianity, the call of Jesus to love and show mercy without qualification, condition or calculation. I have learned that when threats to our health arise, we must return to our core. This applies to our physical bodies. The best remedy for chronic back pain is core exercises: crunches and sit-ups. This applies also to our culture. When threatened by increasingly violent media, we must not permit our children to consume it nor to act out on the diabolical messages it sends. When threatened by discord, the church must remind itself of its core values and then take action on them.

When a pandemic hits we must get past the posturing. We must rededicate ourselves to living out the teachings of Jesus. Start with a little humility. **Nobody** really knows what will happen next with COVID-19. Nobody. Especially those who loudly proclaim they do. Continue then to learn what you can from sources you trust, but listen also to those with whom you disagree. Exercise patience and tolerance. Pray for forbearance.

The Greek word philadelphios means “brotherly love”. The meaning also includes **respect** for all. As we all struggle to gain greater understanding of the threat

the virus poses, and the appropriate public health measures to take in response, show respect toward all. Listen to them. Think about their fears and their ideas. And should any person in a position of responsibility have made a bad choice two, or six, or twelve weeks ago, yet whose choice was based on a sincere desire to do the right thing, cut them some slack. A little mercy goes a long way.

Last Wednesday evening the elders of the Central Presbyterian Church met in session. Together, we debated when and how to resume face-to-face programming—including worship. We managed to disagree without being disagreeable. Male and female; from a teenager to octogenarians; politically conservative to liberal; fans of IU, Mizzou, SLU and—inexplicably—Purdue, we carefully picked our way through the minefields. And here is what we decided:

In order to act out our love for one another, we will gradually begin providing face-to-face programming in phases. We will continue to follow the news closely, trying to learn everything we can from reputable sources, about how to come back together safely. We hope to hold our first Sunday worship on June 14, though that date may change based on our progress through all the necessary issues we must solve before we can worship. We created a task force to go to work on those issues. That group has already started its efforts. We expect to continue providing virtual worship services for quite some time, so the more vulnerable among us can continue to worship with us while keeping their distance. We may start with outdoor worship, weather permitting.

Your church leadership faces many questions. We must plan for things like possible liability insurance issues, cleaning practices, providing for the correct distancing in the sanctuary (when we get there), when to resume Sunday school and fellowship time (and how), how to communicate to vulnerable groups our concerns for them and their decisions about whether to attend, and more.

The elders and I understood that no matter what we decided somebody in the church would be disappointed. Yet we had the God-given responsibility of making critical decisions on the church's behalf. Eighteen months ago our church officers identified the core values of this congregation. Returning to them now might help us maintain peace and unity in these difficult times. Three of those core values are:

We make decisions in respectful, collegial way.

We love and support one another.

We exercise theological forbearance, meaning that we respect differences of belief.

Respect, love and support. It seems to me these words simply restate Jesus' call for us to love, do good and show mercy. I have served ten Presbyterian congregations as an ordained officer. Among these ten Central Presbyterian of Terre Haute comes the nearest to living out its core values—and there is no close second. I urge us all to use this strong foundation to continue taking action on Jesus' call. I ask you to pray for the task force now working to advise the elders how best to reopen our face-to-face programming. I ask you to pay attention to the communications they send, listening and pondering why they decide what they decide. I pledge that we on the task force will afford you the same courtesy if you should share ideas for our

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