

We Are the Disciples sermon series
In Essentials, Unity... Romans 14:1-9
May 5, 2024
Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

Have you heard about the Third Defenestration of Prague? Well, you don't know what you're missing. The year is 1618. A Catholic king, Ferdinand, had been installed in the region of Eastern Europe but Protestant distrust of him had grown, based on their claims of his intolerance of them. For example, Ferdinand had halted the construction of many Protestant churches and, rumor has it, he had banned broccoli casseroles from their potlucks. Heresy!

Some Protestant leaders hosted some Catholic leaders at a castle in Prague to address their disagreements. Things got a bit heated as they can do in church gatherings, to the point that the Protestants took three of the Catholic leaders and threw them out of a third-story window, seventy feet off the ground. We don't have a lot of heated church meetings, but I'm still glad Crestwood has only one story! The German word for "window" was fenster," so to defenestrate someone means to throw them out of a window. Hence, you now know about the Third Defenestration of Prague. Sadly, I don't have any good intel on the first two defenestrations.

Believe it or not, the Catholic leaders survived the fall. Catholics claimed they were caught by angels. Protestants claimed they landed in a pile of manure. Whether they were saved by seraphim or...sh...dung (not all alliterations need to be made), this event helped instigate the 30 Years War, during which Protestant and Catholic city-states ruthlessly fought each other, with eight million deaths as a result. Don't mess with the broccoli casserole.

Writing in response to this conflict, a German theologian named Peter Meidelini said, "Catholics and Protestants both follow Jesus! Consider that for a moment before you resume killing each other!" And then Meidelini is said to have written the words, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity." That line has become a guiding light for many denominations, including ours, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). But no statement lends itself to more misinterpretation and wayward application than this one. Does it still apply in our world today as much as it did in 1618? As Christians living in a political landscape filled with landmines and drawn swords and metaphorical defenestrations, what does it mean to try and live out this statement?

First, join me in reveling in the irony that this statement, which promotes unity and agreement over everything else, has been a source of conflict based on the question of who said it in the first place. Historically, it is attributed to by St. Augustine of Hippo and John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. I mentioned our friend Meidelini earlier, but in my research this week I also saw the phrase attributed to Rupertus Meldenius, who may or may not have been Peter Meidelini. Another source said the person who first said this was Marco Antonio de Dominis. And, finally, one person said it was probably John Amos Comenius, who was widely known as "that incomparable Moravian." How can you argue with that? So, who said it? Does it matter? Although some fervent church historians may disagree with me, this is what I would consider a "non-essential."

What else is considered non-essential? And what is essential? Is determining the moment when life starts an essential or non-essential? Depends on where you fall on the question of abortion. What about Black Lives Matter? Is that essential? If so, is it also essential that Blue Lives Matter? That All Lives Matter? How about recycling? Or who you vote for? Essential or

non-essential? Just a conversation about what counts as essential and non-essential could make us feel like defenestrating someone, not to mention the conflicts over the actual issues.

This statement isn't just relevant to modern-day issues like the war in Gaza or the Ukraine, or even the Thirty Years War. In the passage I read today, Paul is writing to the Romans, who are locked in their own conflict. Paul didn't start the Roman church, but that congregation was important to Paul, because he was hoping they would bankroll his mission to Spain to start new churches. Before Paul travels to Rome, he wrote this letter to introduce himself and to address some of the conflicts he'd heard about within the church.

The Roman congregation itself was a fascinating study in church politics. When it was founded, it was run mostly by Jews who believed in Christ as the Messiah, with a minority of Roman pagans who had converted to this same belief. Well, along comes an antisemitic emperor who didn't like the Jews, so he threw them all out of Rome. So, the Roman church went from being a mixed congregation one day to almost exclusively former pagans the next.

Well, a new emperor took control and decided the Jews should be allowed to return to Rome. When they did, they went back to their old church and found the pagans had changed everything: the carpet in the sanctuary was a different color, they were saying "sins" instead of "trespasses" in the Lord's prayer, and at the potlucks, all the broccoli casserole had been replaced by Caesar salad. So, there was this battle for control within the church over who got to say what was essential and non-essential.

It's to this situation that Paul wrote this letter. Remember the first line? "Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters." The King James version says, "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations." I love that! Now, let me read this passage again, this time from the translation *The Message*, which captures it beautifully:

"Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with—even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.

"For instance, a person who has been around for a while might well be convinced that he can eat anything on the table, while another, with a different background, might assume he should only be a vegetarian and eat accordingly. But since both are guests at Christ's table, wouldn't it be terribly rude if they fell to criticizing what the other ate or didn't eat? God, after all, invited them both to the table. Do you have any business crossing people off the guest list or interfering with God's welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help.

"Or, say, one person thinks that some days should be set aside as holy and another thinks that each day is pretty much like any other. There are good reasons either way. So, each person is free to follow the convictions of conscience. What's important in all this is that if you keep a holy day, keep it for *God's* sake; if you eat meat, eat it to the glory of God and thank God for prime rib; if you're a vegetarian, eat vegetables to the glory of God and thank God for broccoli. None of us are permitted to insist on our own way in these matters. It's *God* we are answerable to—all the way from life to death and everything in between—not each other. That's why Jesus lived and died and then lived again: so that he could be our Master across the entire range of life and death, and free us from the petty tyrannies of each other."

Is there anything more damaging to the unity of Christ's body than petty tyrannies and doubtful disputations? Churches have divided and then divided again and then, just for good

measure, divided again over such things. And the Bible doesn't help, because it reads a lot more like a story of how much God loves God's disobedient children than it does a set of clear instructions on what is essential and non-essential. So much is left up to us to decide that we can't help but disagree. One commentator I read this week actually said, "Everything that Scripture proposes to be believed and practiced is essential – not equally essential but essential nonetheless." So, everything is essential in the Bible, but some things are more essential than others? Isn't that the definition of a non-essential? Is it any wonder Christians can't get along these days? We've allowed our disagreements to become breaches of love and occasions for pride and rivalry, to the point we have failed in our calling to be the one body of Christ.

You'll notice that I've fastidiously avoided defining for you what is essential and what is non-essential. That's the beauty and frustration of our denomination, which leans into the freedom of belief and away from dogmatic prescriptions. I think most of us could agree that an essential is belief that Jesus Christ is the son of God, that he is our Lord and Savior, that we are made one with him through baptism and reaffirm that covenant through communion. What else is essential? The virgin birth? The historical accuracy of scripture? What the Bible has to say about immigrants or sexuality? I don't know for sure. And as soon as I say that, for me those become non-essentials. But they may not be for you.

That's why the most important part of this statement is the last part: "In everything, caritas," which is translated as "charity" or "grace" or "love." It's the same word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians when he says, "And these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is caritas – love." It seems like in our debate over what's essential and what's non-essential, we've forgotten what should serve as a foundation and umbrella for all things. Love.

This is going to be a particularly difficult year to try and live out this phrase, even within our own families. In the months ahead we may disagree with someone about a political issue or a candidate's character or a Supreme Court decision. We might even be tempted to defenestrate a loved one or a neighbor. We may want to replace this statement with, "In all things, you can die and rot in Hades you Godless heathen." Doesn't have quite the same ring to it, does it?

One of the things I love about our denomination is how expansive we draw the circle around what we believe. There is incredible freedom within that circle to work out your faith for yourself. I can't tell you what's an essential for you. I also can't tell you what to believe about a non-essential. But I can tell you this: In all things, love. In all things, love. In all things, love.