

BECOMING A CONTAGIOUS CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY 5 **“INCLUDING OTHERS IS THE PASSION OF A C.C.C”**

Over the past month we've discussed becoming a Contagious Christian Community. We've considered that the Heart of a C.C.C. is encountering God; that the Blood of a C.C.C. is sharing life; that the Soul of a C.C.C. is growing deeper. I'm running out of body parts! Today I want to consider what is the passion of a C.C.C. Passion is a mis-used and misunderstood concept in our world today. People are passionate about lots of things, some of them inappropriate. Will you join me today as we think, about what a C.C.C. should be passionate? I believe that a C.C.C. ought to be passionate about including others. Jesus was passionate about including others:

You need to know that I have other sheep in addition to those in this pen. I need to gather and bring them, too. They'll also recognize my voice. Then it will be one flock, one Shepherd. John 10:16

The Apostle Paul, once a Christian hating Jewish leader, became passionate about including others. Paul, who met Jesus on the road to Damascus, and got his life turned 180 degrees around. From hating Christians to giving the rest of his life to passionately making people into Christians. Listen:

Even though I am a free man with no master, I have become a slave to all people to bring many to Christ...When I am with those who are weak; I share their weakness, for I want to bring the weak to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings. I Corinthians 9: 19, 22-23

That's appropriate passion...and I want to explore how we ought/can/should/will include others in this new C.C.C. we are building and becoming! First I want to share this same passage from I Cor. from the Bible called The Message:

Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized—whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view.

I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it!

Do you want to be in on it? I do! I want us called First UMC, to become more passionate about including others. I've seen, heard of, and know of far too many churches which have become nothing more than social country clubs, where the members only get to vote, where the members only have their needs met, where the members guard the membership and keep out any others. I don't ever want us to become that. I'm passionate about this. I believe a passionate inclusion of others will require three things:

1. OUR ATTITUDE WILL BE: ACCEPTANCE NOT APPROVAL

I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people...

What am I talking about? I believe this new C.C.C. will be accepting of all people, and I mean all people. Many of you have returned petitions and resolutions that are being sent to our General Conference and our conference delegates expressing your opinions that our membership, our church, our fellowship, our community...will be open and accepting of all people! We have no right as a church, or C.C.C. to reject those whom Jesus has accepted. If we wish to follow and reflect Jesus Christ, then our new community attitude will be one of acceptance, blatant acceptance.

But notice what I believe is also important. Just because we are accepting of all people, doesn't mean we approve of all people's behaviors, choices or actions. I was accepting of our sons experiment with dreadlocks, but you didn't see me growing any! We will practice that delicate balance between accepting and approving. Here's why.

Accepting people is good, godly, but approving sin, sinful choices, and sinful lifestyles; not only weakens the fabric of the community...it doesn't help the person. We must never be confused about this.

It helps no alcoholic to welcome him or her into the community, pat them on the back, and say... 'well, God must have made you that way...who am I to tell you, you can't drink.' I know this is a fine line, and I'm sure I've inappropriately crossed it, and may well again; but we must not lower the standard of the Bible or Jesus himself in order to accommodate the culture, or not make people feel guilty. Our best option is to take a lesson from Jesus and how He accepted the people he encountered.

Jesus accepted the Woman at the well, offering her His Living Water, but he didn't approve of her 4 former husbands and current living relationship. Jesus accepted Matthew, and made him a disciple, but he didn't approve of his fraudulent tax collecting schemes, or his inordinate love for money. Jesus accepted the woman caught in adultery, even used her situation to dramatically teach some hypocritical Pharisees, but he didn't just send her away, approving of her choices or victim-hood; he sent her away with the command to "go and sin no more." I believe a passionate inclusion of others will require accepting but not necessarily approving. 2ndly, I believe a passionate inclusion of others will require:

2. OUR PROGRAM WILL BE: TRUTH-BASED, NEED-DRIVEN, LOVE-WRAPPED

I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ.

To continue my point, and expand it a bit; consider that our programs, whether worship, or study or fellowship or evangelism, or administration or even advertising... everything we do in the name of Christ, and the name of FUMC, must be based on the Truth, driven by people's needs, and wrapped in our best love.

Truth based because the world is so predominated by and susceptible to error. Truth that legitimately sets people free, and guides them in that freedom. Truth that maintains standards, and provides authentic hope. Not my Truth, not your truth, not even our 'understanding' of Truth; but God's truth as revealed in God's Son who boldly claimed of himself: *I am the way...I am the TRUTH...I am the life.*

We may not understand all of God's truth, but that must not deter us from declaring it, and adhering to it, building, basing and governing all we do around here in that truth!

Our programs must meet people's needs, and those change! We can no longer support and maintain programs that no longer meet people's needs, just because we've always done them! And we don't get to determine what people need...we have to listen to what they tell us! It's not that any of us gets to set our own private agendas for this new community...God does that, but we must create and design ministries that actually try to meet people's needs.

And all we do; must be beautifully wrapped in our best love. You know I'm not much for that touchy-feely stuff, but we must genuinely love one another; express it and receive it. And we must love all those God brings to our community, and love those we meet wherever we go who so desperately need what we and God have to offer them!

There is a story about a man who was walking down the street. He passed a used-book store, and in the window he saw a book with the title, "How to Hug." He was taken by the title and, being of a somewhat romantic nature, went in to buy the book. To his dismay, he discovered that it was the seventh volume of an encyclopedia set that covered the alphabetical subjects "how" to "hug." Everyone knows that the church is a place where love ought to be manifested, and many people have come to church hoping to find a demonstration of that love—only to discover an encyclopedia on theology. IT'S TIME TO CHANGE THAT AND THIS IS THE PLACE...THIS NEW C.C.C.! Lastly, I believe a passionate inclusion of others will require:

3. OUR APPROACH WILL BE: INFILTRATION, NOT IMITATION, OR ISOLATION
I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view.

Let me break down those words, in reverse.

There are many Christians, and many Christian churches who have withdrawn from the Great commission in order to maintain their pristine buildings, images, and sense of control. There are many who have withdrawn from the evil world, and all the sinful realities of our current existence. For these people the church remains the last bastion of an irrational and changeless reality; that fosters effective memories of days gone by, and must not be disrupted by incorporating anything new, or different. There are Christians who surround themselves only with other believers, praying for the salvation of the world, while scoffing at the very sinners for whom they are praying. As long as I'm the pastor of this community, we'll never withdraw into some self-induced stupor of isolationism!

Nor will we imitate or accommodate ourselves or God's standards to the currently acceptable cultural values. The church is not immune to the advances of our culture, but we do not have to sell our collective soul in order to be relevant. The message of Jesus Christ is as unchanging as the Word itself, but the methods must always be adapted and modified in order to reach emerging generations with divergent needs. Do you see the point? We must not set our course by the whims of society's wishes, but by the Will of the Almighty God!

And that will...is to infiltrate the very culture in which this community exists. I'm impressed by the Apostle Paul's ability to accommodate his preaching (and living) of God's message to his different audiences. To the scholars on Mars Hill he quoted poetry, law, and history. Before Agrippa he appealed to their shared Roman heritage. To the Corinthians he spoke harshly of their haphazard handling of the holy. To the Ephesians he spoke lovingly, for he knew them the best. To the Jews he spoke of the law and its shortcomings; and to the Gentiles who felt like second class citizens, he especially spoke of Grace.

He didn't change the essential message, but he infiltrated each audience, each city, each situation, each person he engaged, with a divinely inspired methodology that uniquely met their individual needs. How I wish we might function just like that. Becoming all things to all people, in order that we might win (include) some...ALL!

The staff of a large church in Ohio attended the NCAA March Madness basketball playoffs a few years ago, when it was held in Indianapolis. The crazy guy with orange hair and a homemade "John 3:16" sign sat directly under the opposite basket from the staff. Have you seen that guy at professional sporting events? Big silly sign, usually an orange or multi-colored afro wig, and some ungodly outfit like the one I wore to my 1972 Jr. - Sr. prom. During a lull in the action the 4 guys sitting directly behind the staff started discussing the meaning of that sign. They didn't know what it meant. Reduced to guessing, one of them remarked he must be signaling someone to meet him in the John on the third floor, stall 16. Another thought it must be some crazy inebriated college student offering his room number for any other interested crazies. Finally the expert in the group remarked 'knowingly' that the John 3:16 sign most certainly was the name of a new restaurant in town. The others all disagreed employing this logic: "Who would send someone out with orange hair and silly hand painted sign to advertise anything?"

Obviously these young men were clueless about the reference to the Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 16...and that is sad, but sadder still is their final comment...an indictment of all who utilize this form of "evangelism" or this form of "church"; to include others. "Who would send someone out with orange hair and a silly sign to advertise anything?" Certainly not Jesus! Instead, He employs (sends) all of us, to do all we can, by all the means we have, in all the ways we can, at all times; in order that we might win and include some...(all)...in this C.C.C. That must be our passion.

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1. OUR ATTITUDE WILL BE: _____ NOT _____

I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people...

2. OUR PROGRAM WILL BE: _____-BASED, _____-DRIVEN, _____-WRAPPED

I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ.

3. OUR APPROACH WILL BE: _____, NOT _____, OR _____

I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view.