

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

1)

I am not good at giving gifts! I lack the creative element to come up with good gift ideas. Not only am I bad at figuring out an appropriate gift for someone, I also don't really enjoy the whole process of *giving* a gift. *“What if they don't like it? What if they break it in the process of unwrapping it? What if they are embarrassed by it?”* These are some of the silly questions that go through my head when I give a gift to someone. I am not good at gift giving.

My wife Carrie on the other hand, she's an expert when it comes to figuring out the perfect gift for someone. She has that skill of thinking about just the right gift. She pays attention for peoples' likes and dislikes. Christmas, birthdays, Easter, anniversaries, you name it – Carrie enjoys thinking about it, while I, I just want to run away from even talking about gifts...

Over the years I have learned one thing: when it comes to giving gifts – just ask Carrie for help. There is no point in wasting energy for a mediocre end-result when I can have it so much easier and just ask Carrie. There's absolutely no reason for me to be jealous of Carrie – she just has the gift of gift giving. I believe God gave it to her, and instead of being jealous I'm just happy to use her gift for my benefit.

Tapping into someone else's gifts and talents, that makes life so much easier in so many areas. Let's face it: we all have different gifts and strengths. We can't be good at everything. Some people are better than us in certain areas – so why not “use” the giftedness of those people to make our lives a little easier *and* achieve a better outcome at the same time?

It's a vivid reminder for me about the biblical truth we heard about today:

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us... - Romans 12:6a

No one is good at everything, we thrive when we can build upon one another's gifts rather than figuring out everything by ourselves.

Today we want to explore our third COS value statement together. You may wonder: What does our individual giftedness have to do with our third value statement?

“COS respects and celebrates diverse opinions”

What does that have to do with people having different gifts and talents? I tell you what.

If we want to learn how to appreciate different opinions, we need to appreciate one thing first:

People are different!

We are not the same, God created each of us uniquely. There is no instruction book on what a human being is because we are all different. That’s how God made us – we are diverse.

Over the course of history this has proved to be an issue on so many levels. Wars have been fought because people are different. But today’s scripture tells us that our differences do not need to lead us to oppose each other – on the contrary, they can lead us to thrive. Our differences can be a great source of blessing and success.

With Romans 12:6 we can even say: it is the human task to figure out how our differences can become our strength rather than the source of our conflicts.

2)

Our third value statement encourages us to utilize our differences as something to be celebrated. “COS respects and celebrates diverse opinions.”

But now comes the critical question: How can we do that when some of the opinions we are confronted with are strange or even risky?

How can we respect and celebrate opinions when they are problematic or dangerous?

Last week when we looked at our second value statement, we bravely poked at it from several angles. Last week we talked about “welcoming all people.” We asked tough questions, we explored how we can be welcoming and accepting when someone is hard to accept and when someone’s behaviors are unacceptable.

Today we also need to be brave and ask hard questions.

Can we poke a little at our third value statement? Are you up for that?

What do we do when an opinion is so diverse that it gets dangerous? What if someone is a Neo Nazi and feels the German Arian race is superior and that inferior races need to be suppressed. You can’t possibly respect that let alone celebrate such an opinion no matter how much you believe in diversity.

Sometimes we can just ignore odd opinions. In fact, I have found that in many cases in which I am confronted with an opinion I don't agree with I don't always have to rush into objecting. I can just be silent – and no: silence does not mean complicity; it's just a very good life skill to be able to do that. [evtl. Men's group...]

But sometimes you can't do that. Sometimes you get confronted with an opinion that is *so* off you have to object.

My question now is the following: How do we set the standard on when not to follow our third value statement? When is it ok not to celebrate an opinion and when is it ok to even object and attack a diverse opinion?

For this we have to go back to our first COS value statement because I'm telling you: it is not possible to heed our third value statement without honoring our first. What was our first value statement?

“COS centers on Christ” – (value statement #1)

Without doing this it is impossible to respect and celebrate diverse opinions! Our first value statement gives us the foundation and the context for how to be holistically welcoming (#2) and it now gives us the foundation and the backdrop for honoring our third value statement.

When you are centered on Christ there are some opinions that do no longer hold up. You can't claim to be centered on Christ and celebrate the opinion of a Neo Nazi that says the Arian race is superior. It just doesn't work.

We need to have a standard for our celebration of diverse opinions and this standard is beautifully expressed in today's reading:

“we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” – Romans 12:5

When we honor this, we can also honor each other's diverse opinions – because then we see them as a reflection of the diversity we are created in. Then, and I want to say *only* then, can we celebrate that we are not all the same. If we know who our center is, we can embrace the precious gift of unity even in diversity. When we know who our center is we can have unity not even *in* diversity but *because* of diversity because we honor God who created us with different views and opinions. Being centered in Christ keeps us from being wishy washy and celebrating just any type of opinion. It gives us a context and a foundation for our respect and celebration.

3)

Let's do just a tiny bit more poking into this. Because here is the thing. In some

regards it is very easy to tell when an opinion is not centered in Christ – i.e. Nazi.

But some issues are more complicated and much more heated. If it was easy to be centered in Christ, we would not have the level of polarization that we have even in the church.

There are so many issues that are threatening the unity of God's church these days because sometimes we don't know if certain stances and opinions are still centered in Christ.

How do we deal with that?

For this we need to again employ our powerful Bible passage from today and look at what it said in V. 3

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you **not to think of yourself more highly, than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.** – Romans 12:3

So many conflicts in our world, including conflicts within the church – stem from our natural struggle to do just this and I struggle with it too.

You probably know how it goes – we can easily get obsessed with a certain opinion or stance that we hold dearly. We get so passionate about our righteous stance that we can't possibly see that someone else might also stand in Christ but comes up with a different opinion!

Do something for a moment: think about a conviction that you are really passionate about. Now think about a person who is centered in Christ just as much as you are but may have the opposite position. Do you think it is possible for you to consider that you might be wrong and your Christian friend with the opposite opinion might be right?

This is a powerful exercise. I don't want to shake you up in your convictions, I want you to explore how you center in Christ. When we center in Christ it involves that we can shamelessly admit that we may not always have it right and that someone else may have a point that deserves to be validated.

As people who are centered in Christ, I feel we benefit from having a certain level of humility to say that we might be wrong with our convictions and opinions.

In Philippians this idea is expressed even clearer, it says:

“...in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” – Philippians 2:3b

Wow! If I regard others as better than myself then I also need to be willing to consider that their opinion deserves to be respected and maybe even celebrated.

It's not easy to do that, especially when it comes to diverse opinions and convictions. But doing it opens up new possibilities. It frees us to tap into each

other's gifts and geniuses.

4)

I started this sermon with a personal example of how I'm not good in gift giving and that I utilize my wife's help who is gifted in that area.

I want to close this sermon on another personal note: I like being together with like-minded people. There is something so comforting to be in a group or together with a person where you share the same or similar convictions and you can talk unfiltered and let your opinion go wild because you know you will not meet a lot of resistance.

In my ministry I have found that it is one of the most powerful things to not just exclusively surround myself with people that are like-minded. I feel that it is so rewarding for me to be part of groups where I don't really fit in and where my convictions are not welcome but where I am welcome as a person.

I want to invite you: don't just surround yourself with people who agree with everything you agree with. Be open to have friends or be part of groups where you can't talk unfiltered because you know that most others in the group feel differently. Focus on being centered in Christ and try to find where others may be centered in Christ too even though they hold different opinions.

You will find that God may grant you to celebrate them even if you don't agree with them. That is the power of a God who created us differently and gave us different gifts and different convictions. But in Christ we find a center that draws us together and being together, this is what we are meant to be. Amen.