

“We Call Ourselves Disciples”

Romans 14:1-8; I Corinthians 11:23-25 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might celebrate your gifts of unity and diversity, at your table, in our relationships, and in our work for justice throughout your world. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

So! Good morning, my friends! I am delighted to be back. It's been fun getting to know some of you over the past couple years, but since I'm sure there are some folks here today who weren't here last summer when I last preached for you, let me start with just a little bit about myself. I am the pastor over at Vista La Mesa Christian Church on Massachusetts. It will be fifteen years that I've been there, this coming November. I am originally from Illinois, I went to college in Minnesota, seminary in Berkeley, and then I spent my first ten years in ministry at a Disciples church in Alabama. I am married to Todd, and we have one spoiled cat that lives with us in Spring Valley.

I'm not really here to talk about myself though, but about the thing that we have in common: our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States & Canada. That's quite a mouthful though, isn't it? People used to usually refer to our tradition as the Christian Church. But these days, you're more likely to hear us called the Disciples (with a capital D) or sometimes the DOC. I think

that has something to do with how it comes off when someone tells you that they're Methodist, and another person says that they're Presbyterian, and then you just say, "well, I'm a Christian." The thing, that both is and isn't the point! There was a saying, in our early days, that tried to make it plain: "We aren't the only Christians, but Christians only."

These days, though, it's not just distinguishing ourselves from other denominations that is needed to understand what it means to be part of the Disciples. Because many folks aren't even clear on what a denomination is or why a church would want to be part of one. Even some churches that are part of a denomination prefer not to lead with that, because of some of the baggage that can be attached to a denomination. You might think it sounds like there's someone else in a faraway "headquarters" that's going to try to tell us what to do or what we have to believe. But that's about as far from the truth of the Disciples as you can get. I often tell people that our unofficial denominational slogan is "You're not the boss of me!" And it's both true and not the whole story.

The truth is that for Disciples, unlike for some other denominations like Methodists or Episcopalians, our denominational ties don't have anything to do with a hierarchy. Nobody is anybody's boss. But it's also true that we've discovered that church structure is a lot more meaningful when it's about compassion and service and relationship than about power, so that we're all just fellow followers of Jesus. We

became a denomination, not so that someone could be in charge, but because we discovered that we are stronger together; we can follow Jesus and live out the gospel more faithfully if we do it in cooperation, not just with the other folks in our own congregations, but with other congregations nearby and even churches all across the continent and the world. You heard me say that we are the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States & Canada – which is why we refer to the “general” church rather than the “national” church when we talk about our shared ministries. But there are also Disciples of Christ in Puerto Rico – who actually participate in our Pension Fund – and the biggest Disciples church in the world is in the Democratic Republic of Congo. There are, of course, complex histories of colonizing mission work there that have had to be unpacked and repented of and grown beyond. But we now have 250 mission partners in 90 countries around the world. We are stronger together.

More personally, I can tell you without a doubt that I would not have gone into ministry as a vocation if it were not for the denomination beyond the local congregation I grew up in. It was (and is) a thriving, active small town church, mind you, but that wasn't how God caught hold of my soul. It was the nine summers of church camp with fellow kids and devoted adults from all over Illinois. It was the excitement of my first General Assembly with 8000-some people in Des Moines, Iowa when I was nine, and the one in Kentucky when I was in seventh grade when I

came home with a cassette tape from a band that formed when a group of people walked across the country for peace the summer before, and seeing Desmond Tutu in St. Louis at the 1993 General Assembly, when he went out and helped place sand bags because the Mississippi River was flooding. My family has been part of the Christian Church, on both sides, about as far back as Disciples go; when we go over to Vista La Mesa later, I can show you the rocking chair that made the migration from Kentucky to Southern Illinois alongside Barton Stone, one of our founders. But that's not why I'm still a Disciple. I'm still a Disciple because this is the only kind of structure that I can imagine working within, trying to be faithful. One where we're connected, not out of obligation, but by choice, by love, by the recognition that we can build the realm of God's love more easily if we cooperate. I wouldn't want to be floating out there alone, with no framework, no colleagues, no partner congregations. And I sure wouldn't want to add the pressure of negotiating a hierarchy to the already complicated job of leading a congregation in the realities of 2026!

So what can I tell you about this little unicorn of a denomination? I didn't want to just give you my perspective, because that would honestly be a little antithetical to the Disciples way. So I got this book that recently came out, which is a series of short essays by various Disciples leaders about the values and approaches that make up who we are. And honestly, the fact that it's a collection of essays, rather than a book written by just one person is also an example of who we are.

Early on in a couple of the essays – the one on Disciples’ approaches to the Bible and the one on Disciples’ approaches to theology – the writers emphasize this diversity of perspectives. Ron Allen starts it out by telling us that there is “no single Disciples approach to...” and he proceeds to talk about the Bible, but that phrase could be applied to pretty much any topic. José Morales, in his chapter about theology explains that “to do theology in a Disciples way is to begin with, and remain open to, diverse ways to think about God.”

The question then becomes how we hold ourselves together if we’re all over the map as we claim to be. Without doctrine to unite us, without a hierarchy to enforce our boundaries, what is it that binds us together? You have heard Pastor Kindra explain that we are a congregationally-led denomination. But can a collection of congregations constitute a denomination? If we can be and do and believe anything we want, what is it that unifies us?

The Disciples answer to that question has pretty much always been: the Table. We are made one by the Living Word that we encounter at this Table. This theme is repeated all through this book, just as it echoes all throughout Disciples history. We gather at this Table every week, and it holds a tension very similar to other family feast tables. We are unified, but we are diverse. We are free to believe and live out that belief as we discern appropriate, but we do it in community. We are a collection of congregations, but we choose to live in covenant with one another, because we know

that our perspective alone will not sufficiently reveal God's presence in our world. Our diversity requires humility; it is not just a challenge, but a blessing. We aren't required to interact with Disciples beyond our local congregation, but when we take the time to do so, our faith and our lives are enriched by the experience. That is the covenant that this structure invites us into.

So what does that look like, in practical terms? It may sound funny, but Romans 14 is one of my favorite ways to explain it. It's a very Disciples chapter. "Let all be fully convinced in their own minds," Paul writes. And he means it. And we mean it. This whole chapter is Paul explaining that it's okay if we don't all do this faith thing the same way, and that love requires that we make room for the way those around us practice their faith, even if it doesn't match how we do it. But also! But also, there are hints, even here, that reveal that it isn't always as easy as Paul implies it should be. Paul himself, in the middle of his treatise on the importance of tolerance for theological diversity, cannot keep himself from expressing his own opinions and judgments: "the weak eat only vegetables"!

Paul is referring to the question of whether those first-century Christians should eat meat from the markets at pagan temples, that is, meat that had been sacrificed to pagan idols, which was then sold for general consumption. Paul's argument was that since the pagan idols weren't real, that meat was no different than any other meat. But there were others who thought that Christians should avoid that

meat, since it was – however they understood it – tainted by its association with the pagan temples. Paul clearly thought their argument was nonsense, but he counseled the Christians in Rome to be understanding of those who felt that way. The humanness of Paul’s attempt to promote tolerance here is kind of adorable. He really wanted to ensure that we all respect one another’s perspectives. But he just couldn’t quite pull it off without slipping in a little bit of condescension about the other side of this controversy.

The thing about the Disciples approach to unity is that we’re not made one as a collection of ideas, but rather as a community of people. That is both why it’s hard and why it works. Even when we’re on opposite sides of an argument, we all still need to eat, so we come to the Table to receive the broken bread that makes us whole. There’s so much more I could share with you about who the Disciples are and what it means to be part of this part of the body of Christ. I would love to see our two congregations work through this little book together, because I think it helps make a lot of things clear that we are often a little vague about. Then again, there is a good reason it stays a little vague. As a church, we have always been careful to note that we are still becoming; we have never claimed that we figured it out and this is how it will be till kingdom come. There are certain things that we know to be central to our identity: the Table, covenant, justice, unity, diversity, liberty. But how those things are negotiated and lived out in any given moment is something that is constantly evolving.

There is much to explore about how Missiongathering fits into the broader family of Disciples. I would love to have you join us this coming Saturday, as we join in conversation with Brian Frederick-Gray, Director of Justice & Advocacy Ministries at Disciples Home Missions, one of our general ministries. We'll gather on Zoom at 10 AM to hear from Brian about many of the justice ministries that Disciples are engaged in, and then we'll have time for conversation, questions, and dreaming together about how we might connect with those efforts. This October, we'll gather in Fullerton for our next Regional Assembly, the gathering of the Christian Church in the Pacific Southwest Region, which stretches from Morro Bay down here to San Diego, and from Las Vegas all the way to Hawaii. We should carpool!

And most importantly, right in front of us, is the growing partnership between our two congregations. There are so many ways we can work together to serve our community and deepen our faith. I'm so glad we're about to break bread together, because that really is where God cements our unity. Thank you for having me today, and I look forward to the continuing conversation!