

Preface:

Well, friends, let's gather together in prayer!

Prayer

Introduction:

So today we're starting a new series, and we're doing something we all love to do, under the right circumstances, which is talking about ourselves a little bit. And not just ourselves, of course, but ourselves-in-relationship-with-God-and-one-another. We're talking about Smoky Row. Most specifically, over the next couple of months we're going to take a look at our Philosophy of Ministry, our Core Values, and talk about them.

Why Now?

The first question, of course, is "Why?" "Why do this?" And I have a bunch of answers! The most basic is that we haven't in a while!

Frankly, the last time we collectively spent time examining our Core Values was back in 2010. And that's not that far away...but according to my records, my kid was 2 months old when we did, and now she's got opinions and a sense of humor and knows math, so a lot can change in 11 years, you

know?

As a congregation we have changed in 11 years, since the last time we collectively talked about our Core Values. And so we need, I think, to check in. Is this thing we say about ourselves still true? I'm not expecting, or planning, on us revisiting our Philosophy of Ministry, drawing back up new Core Values, and doing the difficult work of re-articulating as best as we're able who we think we are.

But I do think it's important for us to check in, and consider how we are living up to these things we say are most true about us.

But...I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's talk definitions, because nothing is more exciting than definitions...

Definitions:

I'm joking, of course. Everything is more exciting than definitions. But the truth is that definitions matter. When Bo was younger--I have permission to share this--she would say words she's heard, and I'd correct her on what the word meant if she'd used it incorrectly, right? And she'd say, "Well, when I say--whatever--I mean this." I have no examples anymore, and the reason I don't is because words mean things, right? To say someone is using a word "correctly" or "incorrectly" is to say that words have

meanings, that definitions matter for shared understanding.

Shared understanding, in turn, matters for every single aspect of human society. Both the Tower of Babel story and Pentecost speaks to this: When languages broke out like hives, and humanity could no longer work on their tower-project, work shut down. No shared understanding meant no work. When Pentecost came, and the Holy Spirit enabled all sorts of people to speak about God in languages they didn't know, so that all sorts of strangers could understand them, a new work of God was launched.

How this relates to Smoky Row is this: We have all sorts of things that give a framework for shared understanding. We have our constitution, which is a sort of guide-map for how we understand ourselves in our, oh, American Organization Context. When it comes to our sense of who we are as a Church, a Christ-sustained community, we have another thing called our Philosophy of Ministry.

So, what is a Philosophy of Ministry? And you all know, already, well then let's be grateful that our biggest issue on this is me, like, wasting our time. That's a great gift!

What is a "Philosophy of Ministry?"

A Philosophy of Ministry is in many ways our most complete articulation of who we are as Smoky Row Brethren Church.

Everything we do for Jesus as a congregation is meant to be tested church is tested against what we say about ourselves in the Philosophy of Ministry. So again, as we ease ourselves out of a COVID way-of-life, and into whatever we're moving into, this measuring-against question becomes relevant.

The church's constitution largely discusses "how" the "business" of the church gets done; the Philosophy of Ministry emphasizes the "why" or "who"--but not necessarily "how" we do our stuff, apart from the ethical demands it places upon us. Our Philosophy of Ministry is our own articulation of what is most true about us, who we really are when we are functioning at our very best.

It both judges us (because we do fall short of it) and motivates us (because we do long to be true to it). Basically, it's our own declaration of our calling or vocation from God.

What's In It?

And, look, a Philosophy of Ministry isn't like the long, 3am meanderings of a kid who's just taken Philosophy 101 and whose mind is blown by it. A Philosophy of Ministry is a pretty structured thing, because shared understanding demands clarity.

Philosophies of Ministry are made up of two parts: A Purpose Statement and Core Values, which are Non-Negotiable.

What? Purpose Statement:

The Purpose Statement is simply that: a statement of the purpose of the church in question. These are pretty generic, or at least pretty universal, because the purpose of the Capital-C Church is pretty universal--although of course there there are different emphases and expressions of this universality, just like there are different ways to structure an organization.

What? Core Values:

The Core Values are those things which, for the church in question, are non-negotiable. They are critical, necessary elements for this or that particular congregation to realize God's particular mission for it in the particular context in which the congregation finds itself.

These might be really different for various congregations, and it's the expression of these core values that contributes to the individuality every congregation has. The core values are the basic, foundation-level things we will not, as a church, give up in our commitment to pursue Jesus.

It is important—critical, really—to keep in mind that simply declaring one's vocation doesn't mean much of anything. It is the carrying out—the embodying— of one's vocation that is the measurement of success or failure for any person--or,

for any church, as it were. Which is just to say that if it came down to a choice between “doing ministry together,” or continually revising our Philosophy of Ministry, the doing wins every time. It’s faith and trust in action.

Why bother?

So, a question comes up, which is...why bother, then? Why don’t we just, like, love Jesus? And it’s a good question, in part because the Church in America over the past few decades seems to be really obsessed with some Philosophy of Ministry-related stuff. Having a great “vision” or “mission,” something catchy and cool, is something American Christians LOVE. Maybe a little too much?

And, look: We don’t follow a Purpose Statement, we aren’t saved by Core Values. And vision--something we’ll talk about in a bit, which is actually a bit of a different thing--can’t ever beat out faithfulness. The level to which we conform together to Christ's likeness is our measure of success, and without this, it doesn't matter how well we articulate anything.

In any situation in which people are organized together to achieve some sort of task there is implicitly a philosophy guiding the way the task—whatever it might be—is undertaken. There are core values that are not negotiable, which support and affirm the philosophy guiding the group's

engagement with things. Over time, this philosophy and these core values become uncritically assumed as normal, good, and sometimes ordained by God.

This always exists. It always is present. There is always a philosophy guiding the way an organization engages with the world. It may not be acknowledged and consciously chosen, but I promise it is there. Some people are such naturally strategic individuals and can so instinctively work out of their talents and gifts that they don't even realize they have this stuff in their lives; but I promise it's there.

This kind of guiding stuff, this life-philosophy, in a church is called a "Philosophy of Ministry." And a Philosophy of Ministry is always present, whether or not it is acknowledged and well-articulated. The Brethren Church, our denomination has one that's pretty well-articulated; whatever congregation and denomination you were a part of growing up--if you were part of one that wasn't Smoky Row--had one, too. Because these always exist, it becomes so critical this Philosophy be very, very explicit and well-articulated. The reason for this is that if the philosophy of ministry isn't clear, it cannot be critiqued, examined, and utilized in the Church's attempt to follow God's call on its life.

Clarity:

Ultimately, it won't be clear to the church in question who it

really is. And the reality is that this unclarity will affect the church's life: just as a clearly articulated P.O.M. can be a wonderful tool, so a vague, impression-based, “sense” of what a church is about can be a bomb that is always going off. Church life becomes unsafe, and the church's attempt to fulfill its vocation is continually frustrated and frustrating to its congregation, leaders, whoever is trying to find Jesus there. Now: Our leaders, I think, keep our Philosophy of Ministry in mind, and many of us have embodied it over time, and I do try to ensure we’re thinking about who we are as we say yes and no to what the world brings us, but...this dysfunctional thing that can happen is part of why we need to talk about this stuff. I don’t want it to happen. You don’t either.

A congregation’s culture, way of dealing with grief or sin, what our meetings are like, where our yes’s and no’s happen—all these things are affected by this Philosophy of Ministry. And that which is not brought into the light to be examined cannot be changed, challenged, or, if need be, disregarded and condemned. Worse things can happen, too, if we don’t articulate this stuff, from internal fights between what our “real” and “assumed” Purpose or Core Values are, to factionalism as different groups rally around this or that home-grown set of Core Values, and fight over what’s “best”--by which they want to mean “most biblical,” but rarely means it. Disunity in some form or another breaks out.

It's like saying, "Let's go for Ice Cream," but the person who suggested it, and is driving, means "Dental Exams" when they say Ice Cream. Shared Understanding breaks down.

But again the work of the Church isn't complete when we articulate what we believe we're about; it's complete when we live up to what we believe we're about. Knowing and articulating this stuff just positions us to speak to each other in the same language, about the same things. It is positional, in that it positions us to know and achieve what we are about. It is the groundwork for really getting down to being the church we in particular are called to be.

Our Philosophy of Ministry becomes a, oh, a pattern that we can compare our congregational activity against; a tool for insight, one that if we have internalized it enough, can allow us to nimbly say yes to certain things and no to others, do certain things and leave undone what we ought to leave undone. It gives freedom the same way good communication always gives freedom, brings clarity into unclear situations. It's a gift.

And we have this gift, Smoky Row! So we're going to talk about it, and let it be all the things to us that it's supposed to be.

What About A Church's "Vision" or "Vision

Statement?”

Now: Vision.

Vision is in its own special category. Smoky Row does have one; we'll talk about it at the end of this series. (Although our Vision Statement is out in the lobby if you want one now.) A vision statement--which, you know, states the vision--doesn't replace a Statement of Purpose or override Core Values. A vision statement describes the preferred future a congregation believes God is leading them toward over some period of time. It's the preferred future, in some period of time, that a congregation--or organization, or person--wants for themselves. It's fleshed out in goals and strategies, which need to be articulated, too. A Philosophy of Ministry, however, describes the posture we take as we pursue some agreed upon vision. So. We'll come back around to this.

Now, Moving forward we'll talk about our Core Values, so we'll wait on those. But let's talk for a few just a few minutes about our Purpose Statement.

Smoky Row's Purpose Statement:

Here's our Purpose Statement. It's on the back of our bulletins, too, if we're in person this morning:

“We join together to pursue God's love, become more like Jesus, and expand God's Kingdom through word

and deed.”

Remember that Mission Statements or Purpose Statements--they by necessity aren't that unique. I mean: The words you use, the cadence, the emphases you make, sure, but when it comes to the purpose of a congregation or the capital-C "Church," there's not a ton of room for novelty, you know?

Our Purpose Statement draws on an understanding of the Christian path to spiritual maturity to give it structure. That "path" can be framed as four "journeys" that a Christian has to make: The inward, upward, outward, and forward journeys.

The inward journey emphasizes the change of someone's inner disposition into one more like Jesus' own, which necessarily bears fruit in our lives as our character changes.

The upward journey is the journey into the understanding of God's deep, powerful love, which draws us into worship, peace, and joy.

The outward journey is a journey into safe, intimate, and life-changing relationships with like-minded Christians.

The forward journey emphasizes our engagement as Christians with the world in service, ministry, justice.

So if we look at this we can see that, like many other Brethren congregations, our Purpose finds itself launched in community--we “join together” as a congregation in that Outward Journey of relationship “to pursue God’s love” in that upward Journey of Worship, “become more like Jesus,” in that Inward Journey of Spiritual Transformation, and “expand God’s Kingdom through Word and Deed” in that Forward Journey of service and ministry.

What guides us as we live into this life together? Our Core Values.

Conclusion:

So, here’s what we’re going to do for awhile: We’re going to look at our Core Values, take them apart, consider them and what they call us to. We’re also going to consider the ways we’re not meeting them, failing to live up to what we say we’re about. And that’s not going to be as fun, but will invite us into either a future conversation on redefining ourselves, or convict us to do better at being us today.

But, there’s this, too. And I’ve hinted at it a little bit.

Philosophies of Ministry? Core Values? Even Vision--that preferred future you have for yourself in some period of time? They aren’t just for groups, right?

People have them, too. We're all becoming more or less like something or other. We're all more or less true to who we believe God has made us to be, and we all--I pray--believe God has made us in love for good things. We have core values, values we simply will not give up, ones that cause us to deeply react when they are threatened. We even have personal mottos--Just like Smoky Row's motto is "Becoming More Like Jesus All The Time!"

These aspects of identity, which are true of organizations, are true of people. And so to end, I'd invite us to think about ours if we haven't in awhile, or ever. What's your, oh, Life Philosophy? I'm looking forward to talking about ours!