

# Pastor Jamie's Sermon

**Good Shepherd Church, September 3, 2023**

## **"Being Christian"**

The NRSV version of the Bible gives us a heading for the Romans chapter 12 passage we heard earlier today. The heading it gives us says "marks of the true Christian." Paul outlines his thoughts on what being Christian in his time and place means. So I thought I would start today's sermon by posing a question back to you all.

I'm going to give you a moment to think about the question, and I'd love to hear a few words from some of you - adults and kids alike. The question is this:

What does it mean for you to be Christian in today's world - in this time and place? I'll repeat the question, and then, if you have a response, raise your hand and I'll bring the microphone to you.

Remember, anyone of any age is welcome to reply, and there are no wrong answers. OK, once again, the question is: What does it mean for you to be Christian in today's world - in this time and place?

When you're ready, raise your hand and I'll bring you the mic. Remember you need to talk right into the microphone.

I can start... Being Christian means being welcoming, affirming, and loving toward everyone I meet - even those who are different from me.

(Time for responses)

Being Christian in today's world is not just one thing. There is not just ONE thing that makes us Christian. And, I would be willing to bet that if we posed the same question to other churches and other denominations, we would get different responses.

So, why does Paul give us this list of what he considers Christian qualities? It might make us wonder what was going on in his world that he felt the need to offer this reminder to the people he ministered to.

We know the world of Paul's time was quite different than our own time.

But in our own time, we live in a world of never-ending distractions in the form of screens - televisions, computers, phones, tablets, and the list goes on and on. And of course now even young people have access to these neverending distractions. Many of us are also exposed to social media regularly, where we are witness to and perhaps even participate in social media disputes over things that are relatively unimportant.

This just happened to me yesterday - I made a simple comment on a post about neutering a dog who was showing some behavioral concerns, and someone else

disagreed, and before I knew it we were debating about neutering dogs and how old they should be when we decide to do that. And neither of us was going to change the other's mind. So what was the point?

We are bombarded with versions of "ourselves" and our communities that are not necessarily who we actually are. The world perceives us one way, and we might even perceive ourselves a certain way that is not the reality of our identities. It can become a front - a deception that we place on ourselves or our community to appease the outside world.

We are essentially on a stage for the world to see. Paul's world, of course, was much smaller. But within that world, people were also much more involved on a closer level in one another's lives - sometimes out of necessity and sometimes out of nosy neighbour syndrome.

But, in today's world, what often happens as we are connected to people around the world at our fingertips, is that we assume the best in ourselves, and we assume the worst in other people. It turns our brains into places where "we" make the world a better place, but "they" are destroying this place and corrupting all that used to be good about this world.

Rarely will we admit to thinking things like:

- Why can't others give as much to this church as I do?
- I hate driving through this run-down neighbourhood, it's not as nice as my own.
- I wish my sibling would do as much for my parents as I do.

Instead of admitting these things out loud, we commit ourselves to a public image that presents only our best selves, and we assume that everyone assesses our actions as only our best intentions. After all, we are just trying to follow Paul's words when he says "loathe what is evil, and cling to what is good," right? Of course, we might be misunderstanding what Paul's intentions were a little bit. But the list he provides also can feel rather difficult to adhere to in today's world. And, it can cause some feelings of guilt or shame to crop up as we hear this list and wonder how well we have adhered to it in our own lives.

But, the point is not to adhere perfectly to this list. Paul is speaking to people who are struggling, just like we do, to live out Christian faith in practice. The challenges we face in our own Christian faith today are no different than the challenges Christians faced in Paul's day.

Well, that's not entirely true of course, because we live in vastly different worlds. But the human mind has not changed all that much, and we are still challenged by our human emotions and our limited human understandings.

So, what does it mean to be Christian today? What is essential to our life as Christians, even as we are challenged to live up to what Paul considers the marks of true Christians? Paul gives us a pretty good run-down, but what it boils

down to from what I can tell is love. Love of God, love of neighbour, and love of self. His list is a reminder of how to treat one another.

The very first thing he says is “let love be genuine.” He then says “love one another with mutual affection.” A bit further along, he says “rejoice in hope.” Love one another with mutual affection, rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. If we remember only those four things, we have a pretty good start to being Christian.

Next week we are going to start a sermon series on what Moravians consider the essentials to our Christian faith. And I’ll go into more detail next week as I introduce the series, but the Moravian motto, as many of you know, is “In essentials, unity; In non-essentials, liberty; In all things, love.” This motto is one of the reasons I was drawn to the Moravian Church.

I don’t want to ruin the message for next week, and I don’t want to bore you next week by going into detail too much today, but we’re going to talk in depth about the six things the Moravian church considers essential, why those six things and not other things, and how they fit into our lives as Christians.

But, in the meantime, I want to talk about one element of our Christian Faith that is incredibly important and meaningful, and which we are going to participate in together today. That act is the celebration of Holy Communion. In the Moravian church, we consider only two things to be sacramental - Communion, and Baptism.

Thus, Communion is a deeply important aspect of our Christian faith. And, I know you all have been celebrating communion regularly through COVID, but today is the first day we are going to go back to the celebration of Holy Communion in the traditional Moravian way.

And, because I understand it has been a few years since we’ve done this, and there are people here who have not experienced the traditional Moravian way of doing communion, I want to talk a bit about the importance of this practice.

First of all, as you can see, I am wearing this flowy white robe today. Some of you may be wondering what the purpose of this robe is. In the Moravian church, it is called a Surplice. There is a long history of the use of the surplice for sacraments, but in a nutshell, it symbolizes the gift of purity and the blessings of Christ that are offered through the ministry of those who act in Christ’s name.

It takes the attention and focus off the individual pastor and is intended to allow the focus of the sacrament to be on Christ. Some pastors wear it for the entire service, and others just put it on during the sacrament. I find it easiest to just wear it for the entire service, but it can be done either way. Some Moravian pastors have even moved away from wearing it at all.

Secondly, we use a Communion liturgy which gives you and me direction on how to proceed with the sacrament. In the Moravian church, the pastor goes out and

serves the elements to you all, and you stay in your seats. We also wait until everyone is served, and we partake together. So, I will pass out the bread first, we will partake together, and then I will pass out the juice next, and we will once again partake together.

The Moravian church defines sacraments as a visible sign of invisible grace. It is a reminder that we ALL receive God's grace. All are welcome to the table in the Moravian church. At least in the Northern Province, you likely will not hear a pastor say that some are excluded from taking Communion.

There is a sacredness to communion that sometimes gets forgotten in the hustle and bustle of busy lives, in our eagerness to get out of church, or in the logistics of receiving the elements. But when we receive communion, we should slow down, breathe, and appreciate the sacrifice Christ made for us.

My very first opportunity to serve communion was at my previous church. I will never forget it, because I was nervous. It was my very first week serving as their appointed pastor, and it was Ash Wednesday. I had been working as their pastor for two days, and I had to serve communion.

You can imagine what was running through my head beforehand - what if I trip? What if I spill? What if I spill ON someone? What if I say the wrong thing? What if I forget what to say completely? Oh, the things that could go wrong! Good thing communion is a sign of grace, right?! It's also lucky the Moravian church isn't as picky about it going perfectly as some other churches are!

But you know what? It went perfectly. And, I didn't think I would feel much other than relief that it was over and that I didn't mess up. But the moment I began serving the bread and made eye contact with every member of that church, I experienced something I did not expect. It was a beautiful moment, incredibly powerful and meaningful, and one I will never forget.

I experienced God's grace that day. I don't know if anyone else experienced it the way I did, but I thought it was beautiful. My anxiety was gone, and all that was left was joy at serving people on behalf of Christ, who died for all of us.

The other beautiful thing about Moravian communion is that, as I said, the pastor goes out and serves you, rather than you coming to receive the elements. It is, for me, symbolic of God meeting us where we are. But, I have noticed something else as well. The people I serve are able to relax and appreciate the sacrament this way.

It takes the pressure off of you all, and you don't have to worry about what happens if you trip, or hold your hands the wrong way, or swallow wrong because it's hard to walk and chew at the same time in front of people.

It is a more intimate ceremony, and, I think, it's symbolic of the way Jesus served others. Jesus went out to the people. Jesus didn't sit back and wait for them to come to him, though of course some people came to him anyway. But in going to

you, the experience becomes personal. And hopefully, you experience grace in that moment you make eye contact and accept the elements.

That is, after all, the purpose for receiving communion. So, I hope that as you receive communion today, you recognize the symbolism behind the act of being served. I hope you experience grace and connection to the divine. And I hope in that grace that you remember what it means *to you* to be Christian in this time and place.

Christ is the reason we gather together each week. Our collective experience of grace, along with faith, love, and hope brings us together and fills us with joy in our love of the divine. In communion, we experience the good news of Jesus Christ, and we experience it together, as one unified body. Amen.

Let us pray: Jesus, we pray with gratitude, hope, and joy today. As we prepare to come to Your table, we feel the joy of welcome. Some of us come to Your table with our brokenness, our anxieties, our worries, our traumas, or our heartaches, and you come to the table with healing grace and with your love for us. Some of us come to Your table in joy, self-confidence, and hope, and you welcome us with open arms.

No matter what we bring to Your table today, you offer Your grace and mercy. You do not require anything of us other than that we come to the table, and for this we are grateful. Many of us have felt unworthy at one point or another in our lives, and yet You have always welcomed us, invited us to sit down, and carried our burdens.

And You do that without complaint, day after day, week after week, month after month, lifetime after lifetime. For this, we thank you. May we open ourselves to your grace as we prepare ourselves to receive Holy Communion today. All of this we pray in your name. Amen.