

3 John 9-15

"Dealing with Criticism."

Today we end a journey that we started almost three months ago. We end our series on the letters of John. Today is the last portion of the three letters, the end of 3 John. We'll begin a series next week, more like a mini-series before advent, so there is a plan for the next three Sundays, we'll cover topics such as the Joyful Christian, the Serving Christian, and the Thankful Christian. These will build upon some of the ideas we have covered in this series, and bring us to an end for the Christian year before we begin the new Christian year with advent.

The focus of the sermon this week concerns criticism. We deal with criticism in our lives in one form or other constantly. We give criticism and we receive criticism. We don't always know what to do with criticism, because sometimes it comes from places that we don't expect. We can be blindsided by criticism. We can also welcome criticism when we know it is meant to improve who we are.

Our portion of 3 John today has quite a bit of criticism in it. In this passage we see the writer John giving a person named Diotrephes some criticism for his actions and behaviors towards other people. John does not really hold back in his criticism and he makes his point known and gives it in such a way that other people can learn from the criticism, which is why the letter of 3 John is included in our New Testament.

We might be wondering why John is giving criticism towards Diotrephes. In the letter we see that apparently Diotrephes puts himself first before other people and is unwelcoming. He makes accusations about John that are probably not true. Lastly, he stops other people from welcoming and others, and even kicks some people out of church. These are pretty serious

accusations and they are accusations that just did not happen in the ancient world but are actions that we can be guilty of today in our modern world.

We can look at the accusations and wonder the standard that John hold Diotrephes to in his actions. I believe that the standard that John is holding Diotrephes to is the standard of Christ's actions. Christ is the example that the early Christian community followed and is the standard by which we put ourselves against today in our Christian circles. The example of Christ is one that we should all strive for and aim to emulate or be an example of so that others can see the good things that Christ did in his ministry.

Jesus Christ in his ministry was one that welcomed all people to his circles, unlike Diotrephes. Jesus Christ was one that put others first, unlike Diotrephes. Jesus Christ was one that did not push anyone away from his teachings or healings, unlike Diotrephes. I think we can see where Diotrephes fails in regards to keeping the standard with Christ.

The actions of Diotrephes are things that we can learn from. In our process of becoming a welcoming and vibrant church we must take the criticisms of Diotrephes seriously. They are things that we can fall into accidentally. I don't believe we are a people that intentionally push people away or act in a manner that is not Christ-like.

I believe in dealing with the criticism of Diotrephes we need to understand the first component of his criticism, which is putting a person first. In our process of opening up to the community we have to intentional about making ourselves open to other people. We may think that we are a friendly congregation, but we have to be intentional about that friendliness. We have to be intentionally putting others first. We have to be vigilant about putting others first in this process.

This also means that we have to put others first in our mission as a church. An example of this would be in our worship. We have worked this past summer in making worship more meaningful and streamlined so it is accessible for us. But now, we need to make sure that we need to make worship accessible for people who may not have experienced Christian worship before. I believe this will require us mostly to make changes to music and the way we approach sermons, which will be discussed in our next vision meeting. We are the ones who have much, such as eternal life, and it is our responsibility and biblical mandate to spread the Gospel to all people, and that includes making our worship in such a way that the Gospel can be shared with those who do not have a church home or those who have never heard the Gospel of Christ before.

Additionally, in our process of making disciples will face criticism of our own making. We will have to be willing to offer constructive criticism of our process and of our leadership. But we need to have a foundation from which to form criticism is a way that is constructive and helpful. This is my next major point in the sermon, using criticism in a way that prayerfully shares the light of Christ.

I believe that again our standards for giving criticisms should be grounded in our Christian witness to the ministry of Christ. Yes, that is a very high standard, but that standard is held in love and grace. We are not perfect people, but we strive to be as Christ was on this earth. We fall short of the great deeds of Christ and could never, ever duplicate what Christ does, but we can use his example for the way we guide our lives. I believe the standard that John used for Diotrephes was held in this standard. Likewise, we should do the same.

There are several ways of giving this criticism in a way that is helpful in our process of prayerfully sharing the light of Christ. First, the best you can do when giving criticism is to not

make it personal. When you give criticism, you don't attack the person. It is given in love rather than an attack of character. Focus on the situation, not the person.

Another way of giving criticism that is helpful is using "I" statements. Rather starting a statement of criticism with "You did this," start the criticism with "I am uncomfortable with this because" and give your reason. Keep the word "You" out of it as much as possible. It allows the criticism to again focus on the situation rather than on the person. It keeps both parties more at ease and it allows both parties to focus on the situation rather than engage in a situation where one party is attacking another.

Yet another way to give criticism, and I believe this is absolutely vital, is to use scripture in a way that builds up another person. I use an image similar to this: rather than sitting across from a person with the bible in hand, sit next to the person with the bible in hand, pointing the situation towards scripture. Use scripture in a way that will build up a person's faith rather than break it down. Use scripture with love first and foremost in a spirit that Christ would use the scriptures to teach and learn. Christ did not use the scriptures to condemn people, but rather to build them up in faith. Likewise, we should follow that example in our work.

Giving criticism is hard, and should be given with care. But what about when you receive criticism? Much of the rules about giving criticism apply when receiving it. Receive it in grace, humility, and with love. Avoid using I statements again and focus on the situation, not the person giving it.

It is important to do your best not to get frustrated to the point where you wish ill will upon the person. Even if they begin to criticize you to the point where you feel like they are attacking you personally, act in love towards them. Always be honest with a person, but act in

love so that you do not sin yourself. Pray for them and ask that they are acting in the spirit of Christ's love.

Working with criticism is difficult, but it is important if we are going to do our work as a church and it is important in our lives as Christians. These skills are skills that are transferrable outside of the church, not just here in the church. Using these skills for criticism allow you to be a representative of Christ to the world. Using these skills allow you to prayerfully share the light of Christ. It is our goal to spread the gospel, so be willing to share the gospel in your acts, especially when those acts are in giving and receiving criticism.

We have a lot of work ahead of us as a congregation in preparing ourselves for new believers and new people in our congregation. We can do this, because we have Christ on our side. We can prayerfully share the light of Christ, because I know we can. I believe in this congregation. In all of our actions, thoughts, word, and deed, may we always be Christ's representative to the world, even when that might be hard to do.

Our goal should always end our encounters in the way that John ends his letter to the early Christian community. 3 John 15 is "Peace be with you. Your friends here greet you. Greet our friends there by name." We should embody this closing, so that in all of our interactions we can wish peace upon each other in friendship and love in the spirit of Jesus Christ. We are in this together, and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the example of Jesus Christ, we can share the love of God with all people in our church, in our homes, in our community, and in our world. Amen.