**We Must Protect This House**

**FBC Albemarle**

**September 7, 2014**

I love the fall. It is my favorite season of the year. The cool, crisp air is great and the changing of the leaves is a reminder of God’s great design. But honestly, I really like fall for only one reason, FOOTBALL. Yes, I am a typical Neanderthal male. I love to watch men in protective gear, pounding each other for three hours only to move an oblong shaped ball into certain area of the playing field. The sweat, the blood, the testosterone… A year or two ago, Under Armour (an athletic clothing company) had a great commercial. It showed clips of players practicing, hitting each other, than huddling together around a team leader who screams out, “**WE MUST PROTECT THIS HOUSE**!” as a battle cry to take advantage of their home field!

As we continue our series on “This Is Who We Are,” we need to consider the importance of unity in the church and how we deal with conflict. Jesus, in Matthew 18:15-20, gave us specific instructions on how we are to handle conflict. Unfortunately, many churches and relationships have been destroyed because these verses were mistreated and used as a weapon rather than a process of reconciliation and restoration. Matthew 18 is not a chapter about church discipline. It is a chapter about the danger of sin and the beauty of God’s amazing grace. The parable of the Lost Sheep and the parable of the unmerciful servant is sandwiched between today’s passage on how we seek reconciliation with one another. It helps us to put into perspective how God pursues us with relentless grace and how we are to relate with one another in the same way.

Over and over, we are reminded that love binds us together. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13, reminds us that the most excellent way is LOVE. “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” However, Paul doesn’t tell us that love equals lack of conflict. In fact, we know that the opposite is true. When love is at work, confrontation – and the residual awkwardness or momentary ugliness – is inevitable. Love, especially among Christians, is not just the heartfelt affection for one another. It is a passionate championing of the will of God for one another. We should always refuse to ignore destructive behavior in each other because love causes us to desire the best for one another.

In order to protect the unity of the body of Christ, we must be willing to address conflict directly with love. So we begin by going directly to the person we are in conflict with or the person causing personal harm. We share our love and concern for them while always pursuing reconciliation and restoration. When a resolution cannot be reached one-on-one, Jesus directs us to seek assistance from two or three Christians who also have the goal of reconciliation. When everything fails, the last step is to bring it before the church body so that everyone can seek a healthy resolution filled with love and compassion. Do you see what drives us in conflict? It should be LOVE, not retribution.

Protecting the unity of the body also requires us to consistently communicate the expectations set by Scripture and lived out by Christ. When someone chooses what is contrary to the standard set by Scripture, it is a decision the person makes to turn away from spiritual health. As many of you experience in parenting, there comes a time when it is healthier to let go than to continually force our love and will on others. The church always extends an invitation to the grace of God, his unmerited favor. But just as Jesus does not force us to accept his grace, we also cannot force the acceptance of his grace on others.

This morning, it is fitting that we have the privilege of setting apart two of our own, who you have seen the work of Christ through their words and actions. We also install and commission a new team of deacons to provide the spiritual leadership for our church. As set apart leaders, it is vital for the health of our church for its deacons to lead by example. When conflict arises, our leaders must never put their head in the sand nor ignore the issues. We must always approach all conflict with love and compassion, desiring a healthy resolution so Christ can be proclaimed and in order for his kingdom to reign. As the body of Christ, We Must Protect This House! This is who we are.