

“Unity Matters”

Ephesians 4:11-16

September 13, 2020

Perhaps you’ve heard the story of two men (it had to be men), each of whom had a habit of leaving churches in frustration and anger after disagreements with pastors and fellow parishioners. Each one left church after church until they found themselves sitting side-by-side on a lonely pew in an otherwise-empty sanctuary. One of the men glances down the pew at the other and says, “Well, it looks like it’s just you and me. But to be honest, I’m not so sure about you.”

The story might be fiction, but there is surely a thread of truth within it that makes me squirm as I chuckle. Over the decades, division and discord have taken center stage in popular perceptions of the Christian church in the United States. It’s not hard to see why. The polarization that plagues our nation as a whole has found ready expression in our communities of worship. Even more tragically, the Church has not only mirrored these divisions, but we have also often magnified and amplified them, held captive to polarized political ideologies in place of theological convictions. I believe this reality has nefarious implications for the Church and its missional identity. How has it happened? Where did we go wrong?

When they were doing research for their book *The Big Sort*, sociologists Bill Bishop and Robert Cushing studied churches and made a surprising discovery. In recent years, the impact of belonging to a church has shifted dramatically. The authors suggest that, in earlier times, the effect of church engagement was *transformation*—that is, meaningful change in the beliefs and practices of the parishioner. This was one of the reasons people belonged to a faith community, to be challenged and deepened. But, in the age of church shopping and self-sorting, expectations have changed dramatically. Bishop and Cushing write, “Ministers depend on pleasing a particular

congregation for their longevity. The last thing they want to do is offend those people or try to transform their viewpoint...instead it’s conformity all the way.” These social scientists prove their conclusion with data, although I imagine many of us can supply our own evidence.

I want to state this as clearly as I believe it. If the church has substituted conformity for transformation, we have forfeited our soul and forsaken our mission. And if I, as your pastor, am more intent on pandering than preaching, the same can be said of me.

If comfort, conformity, or ideological unanimity are not the goals of Christian community, what is it that binds us together? What should a preacher, or a congregation, seek instead of likeminded-ness? For an answer, I turn to my favorite preacher. Aware of the risks of division wounding the church and muting its message, the Apostle Paul preached *unity*. For Paul, our commitment to one another is not incidental to our identity as followers of Christ. It is essential. To illustrate this, Paul employs a powerful metaphor, his favorite way to think about the church. The Body of Christ. Paul insists that we are all part of the same living, breathing organism, that we must cooperate and collaborate in order to be faithful, that we are only one part of a much larger whole. It means that we really, truly *need* one another—especially those whose perspectives diverge from ours. And, here’s the most challenging part of Paul’s charge, it means we cannot walk away when things get tough or relationships get frayed or debates get heated. Unity is not something we manufacture by getting along. It is a gift we receive by sticking together when it’s easier to come apart.

I love Paul’s letters because they describe real life. Paul did not write theological textbooks. He wrote

correspondence to people he knew who struggled to hold faith and hold it together in complex times. And his most common theme is the same one a frustrated parent might give two sparring children (I imagine it in the same tone of voice): “You are members of the same family. Act like it.”

In a variety of ways, this is the theological truth and practical admonition that will guide the life of our congregation in the months ahead. Each summer, I prayerfully plan and propose a focus for the church’s program year. Last fall, we began a four-year journey with the text you just heard from the fourth chapter of Ephesians. You might recall that our first year emphasized the ministry of belonging. This year, we take as our theme, “Christ at the Center: The Ministry of Unity.” And so, we return to this text from Paul’s letter to a real church with real challenges, and we find in his words a message that is for us as well. Unity matters. Act like it.

A confession. I chose this sermon title many months ago, before this moment in which declarations about who or what matters would be given such powerful and urgent public expression. And yet, God is faithful and God’s Spirit moves within us and despite us. In a congregation of diverse and well-formed perspectives on every imaginable topic, we are compelled to contend with the weighty issues of our time. What is surely *not* faithful is to refuse to wrestle, or to allow divergence to lead to divorce. Why? Because unity matters. In recent weeks, I’ve been asking myself whether unity is even possible, what it looks like in a fractured and frustrated era. I hear so many heart-wrenching stories of longtime friendships ended, even families torn to pieces. I listen as voices from across the spectrum give up on reconciliation with “the other side.” I understand the impulse. In such a time as this, where do we find unity?

Paul’s answer was deceptively simple. The glue that holds the Christian church together, then as now, is faith in Jesus Christ and a desire to live his way in the world. We are called to be the church *of Jesus Christ*, to embody the world-altering, earthshaking truth that

in Jesus we have seen and heard God’s final word. We belong to one another and to the God who created us. We are most fulfilled when we are united.

Sounds great, right? Except—we aren’t...and so, we aren’t. If that is what you are thinking as you read Paul’s words or listen to mine, you are in good company. Sometimes I find in the New Testament a dream church that has surely never existed outside the mind of God. The real church has been divided and dividing since the First Century. And now, from the outside looking in, many see us as a hopelessly fractured and irredeemably irrelevant relic of an era long past. Or, perhaps worse, a thin veneer of spirituality covering a political agenda entirely imprisoned to partisan perspectives—a possibility we will take up on the next two Sundays at Second.

A couple of weeks ago, one of you sent me an essay that got my attention with its first line: “This is a massive issue—perhaps the biggest meta-threat facing the church in the 21st Century.” The issue was really a complex set of challenges best summarized this way—followers of Christ are increasingly shaped not by the life and spiritual practices of our faith community but by the ideologically polarized ecosystems in which we spend the vast majority of our time. Can the church really shape our lives when competing with these totalizing narratives and ecosystems? Can we even talk and listen to one another across these vast divides and without dismissive rhetoric? Our answers have significant consequences for the future of faith *and* the healing of our broader divisions. Some have suggested, not without evidence, that the church has abdicated its role in this work through negligence and capitulation. Sometimes, we have chosen to hover above the fray and forgotten the ethic of Christian responsibility to the call of this world. Other times, we have been drawn into ideological battles and tactics, neglecting the ethic of Christian charity that must undergird all our interactions.

With both clarity and compassion, the Apostle Paul preached a powerful gospel of God’s grace and its impact on our lives. We must do the same. His goal

was not comfort but transformation. Ours must be the same. In the Church, our perspectives and actions must be shaped by God's word and Christ's command. In the Church, when we proclaim what, or who, matters, we do so in the name of the God who always seeks out the left behind, comforts the grieving, calls the powerful to accountability, and remembers the forgotten. This is what matters to God. So long as some of God's beloved children are denied the fullness of life intended for all, the work of the Church is to be united in seeking justice, compassion, and equity.

Focusing our attention on unity in the year ahead is not an exercise in burying our heads in the sand or singing Kumbaya while Rome burns. This is hard work. It is too important to ignore. It means speaking from our own hearts and listening while others speak from theirs. It means cultivating the relational space necessary to develop character, form faith, and grow hope. It means grounding our rhetoric *not* in the desire to score points or slam others but in genuine seeking for the truth that might set us free.

In recent weeks, I've been repeatedly struck by one line of this morning's scripture text: *speaking the truth in love, we must grow up*. It sounds to me like a mission statement for a church in the fall of 2020. Our time calls for a maturity of faith that allows us to speak truth, and to do it in love. This is what I will seek to do for as long as I have the privilege and call to stand behind this pulpit. I will preach the gospel of which I am unashamed. I will serve the God who calls us to sacrificial love and humble confession. I will proclaim the word of God that is not cheap grace nor easy comfort but costly, difficult discipleship. We need a serious faith for these serious times, and I will seek to offer that in all that I say and do.

I pray that you are joined to this community of faith and attentive to this time of worship because you want to be transformed. That's why I'm here. I really do believe that God's Spirit can change us. I really do believe that God's Spirit calls us to listen. I really do believe that churches like this one can offer an alternative vision to the inhumanity and

outright hatred that holds so many in its grip. I really do believe that we can raise the bar on what it means to live faithfully, that we can reach beyond the comfort of our echo chambers to hear the voices of those long silenced by the algorithms that govern our social media feed or the choices that dictate our news consumption. We can live into a unity that we do not create through a process of weeding others out, but rather one that comes as a gift from the God who is Lord of us all. The God who can make more of us than the sum of our parts.

I really do believe that we can do this. And I know that we must try. Our God demands it of us. The Spirit of unity empowers us. The Christ who calls us to grow up and grow together will be with us every step of the way. Amen.