

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Sunday, January 22, 2023**  
**10am**

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

This week is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This is an annual observance sponsored by the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity. It has been observed since 1968 and invites Christians from around the world and across our diverse traditions to remember each other in prayer and strengthen the bonds of love and mission we share in Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> The United Methodist Church is part of the World Council of Churches, and our local churches are encouraged to observe this week of prayer.

Praying for unity can feel a lot like praying for peace: It's something we know we ought to do, but do we really believe it will come to pass? Not one of us has known anything other than a divided church that keeps on dividing. Methodists are just one small branch of Jesus' family tree, grown from another much older branch. In our tradition's almost three hundred years, we have done our share of dividing, uniting, dividing again. Just last week I received notice of a special Annual Conference session to approve the disaffiliation of churches from our connection. The only emotion I could muster at that news was resignation.

But Paul was not resigned to our divisiveness. Dividing the body of Christ was unthinkable to him, and not because he served in an earlier, less jaded age of Christianity. Even when he walked this earth, Jesus' followers were prone to bickering with each other. Paul is no idealist; he knows that division is part of the human condition. He's just not willing to accept the status quo. And neither should we be.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-is-the-week-of-prayer-for-christian-unity>

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is written with the express purpose of confronting division in the church. Some Corinthian Christians are claiming they are better and truer disciples because of their spiritual gifts. There are also class divisions, with members of the social elite claiming they have greater insight into the Gospel than believers who are poor and working class. The church has only existed for a few years and is already sorting itself into factions. And so, Paul does not waste any time in attempting to correct the Corinthians. He pleads with them as "brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you but that you be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose" (v. 10).

The urgency of Paul's appeal is evident in his words. He phrases his plea for unity in three different ways: "be in agreement," "let there be no divisions among you," and "be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose." He also bolsters his plea with two important theological claims. He calls the Corinthians "brothers and sisters," emphasizing that they are kin (family) to one another. And he makes his plea "by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." This is the same authority and language that is invoked at our baptism.

When we are baptized, we are initiated into the family of God. We enter a new covenant with God, but also with our siblings in Christ. That covenant is sacred. It binds us to each other across every line of demarcation – even theological differences. In The United Methodist Church we acknowledge only one baptism. That means that if you are baptized in a different church, and then you join the UMC, we do not re-baptize you. We believe that despite the differences in theology between our church and the church where you were baptized, your baptism is still valid. This is because the grace of baptism is conferred through the power of God, not the individual or church doing the baptizing.

Paul baptized only the founding members of the church in Corinth; most of its members were baptized by others. This does not matter to Paul, even though he has differences with other leaders in the church, like Apollos and Cephas (Peter). Paul is clear that it is not the method of baptism or the baptizer that unites Christians, but the cross of Christ. The cross symbolizes the saving work of Jesus that was accomplished through his ministry, death, and resurrection. It is this saving work that forms the basis of Christian unity and nothing else.

I was recently on another church's website and I came across their statement of faith. They outlined the doctrines of our faith they believe are essential for salvation, like belief in the Triune God (Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit) and belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus. While I could argue a few details, there was little I disagreed with. It was pretty much a restatement of the ancient orthodox creeds of the Church.

But then they outlined the beliefs they believe are essential for Christian *unity*, for the body of Christ to be whole. These included beliefs like men are the sole head of the family, baptism should only be by immersion, every local church should be organized the same way, women cannot be pastors, and very traditional beliefs on marriage, gender, and sexuality. The list of essentials for unity included seventeen separate points.

I spent some time pondering this list and wondering what Paul would make of it – what Jesus would make of it! I considered that list as I studied Paul's letter to the Corinthians. And here is what I concluded: That list does not describe unity. That list describes uniformity. And Paul does not preach uniformity. In chapter 12 Paul acknowledges that there will be differences in the body of Christ and that this is even part of God's plan for growing the kin-dom. Unity does not require agreement on all things. Unity only requires agreement on the essentials. "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity," as the saying goes.<sup>2</sup>

The question, of course, is what is essential? Christians have different definitions of essential. But Paul's definition is clear: What is essential is the cross of Christ. This is the message Paul is called to preach – no more and no less.

And what is the message of this cross that is "foolishness to those who are perishing" and the "power of God" to those being saved? (v. 18) That message is the costly, self-giving love that Jesus demonstrated when he was crucified for us. On the cross Jesus' body was broken and his blood was shed for the sake of the whole world, that all people can be reconciled to God. The Church's purpose is to imitate that cross-shaped mission: Reaching up in reconciling relationship to God and out in reconciling relationship to our neighbors. The kin-dom of God is defined by a cross-shaped way of thinking, where life is no longer about *me*, but

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<sup>2</sup> Ironically, there is not complete agreement on the origin of this saying.

about we. This message cannot be understood by those who order their lives according to selfish interests. But to those of us who strive to order our lives according to kin-dom values, where the needs of the community are brought into balance with the needs of the individual, God saves us from our captivity to selfishness and divisiveness.

Unity is more than just a hope or a goal. It is a defining aspect of the kin-dom of God. Jesus prayed that his followers would be united so that the world would know God's boundless love (John 17:20-23). To have the same mind as Christians means we share Jesus' cruciform thinking. To agree as Christians means we preach together Jesus' cruciform message. To be united as Christians means our combined public witness is cruciform in shape. It is self-giving. It puts the needs of our neighbors and our community above power, prestige, or the need to be right. But when we allow ourselves to be divided by the nonessentials of our faith, we empty the cross of its power and we weaken our witness.

Theologian Alma Tinoco Ruiz wrote recently in *The Christian Century*,

*“Jesus knows that the only way we can face the challenges the world presents us is by being united in love. The unity Jesus desires for us is part of God’s salvific plan for humanity. What better way could there be to experience abundant life here on earth? It is not just about God’s promise of eternal life; it is also about experiencing the kingdom of God here on earth by experiencing unity with others, like the unity of the Father and the Son.”<sup>3</sup>*

We have been reconciled in love to God through Jesus Christ. Now our mission is to build the kin-dom of God by being reconciled to each other. When we are separated from each other by our differences and disagreements, we pray and work for reconciliation. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians,

*“I...beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”* (Eph 4:1-3 NRSVUE).

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<sup>3</sup> <https://mailchi.mp/christiancentury/sc-free-2023-01-16?e=500d31cd50>

Now, I want to be clear that reconciliation cannot and should never be forced. God honors our free will and does not force a relationship with us. Likewise, we cannot force a relationship with another person, especially if we have done that person harm or they have harmed us. We should never use unity as a weapon or means to deny the real suffering and oppression of people. I say this as your pastor: You have permission to set boundaries with the people who hurt you. Setting and keeping boundaries honor the image of God inside us; respecting the boundaries of others honors the image of God in them. Boundaries also create space to heal from the wounds of disagreement so that we are better able to engage with each other and find common ground in the future. Sometimes the only common ground we can find is respecting each other's boundaries. But even when we must keep permanent boundaries with others, we must never lose sight of the hope of eternal reconciliation. Scripture promises that all things in heaven and on earth are being reconciled to God through the blood of Jesus (Col 1:19-20). It is the Spirit that knits us together, and this is an ongoing work of grace.

When we pray for reconciliation and unity, we can pray that the Spirit will change our estranged neighbor's beliefs or feelings. But Jesus tells us to deal with the log in our own eye before judging the speck in our neighbor's (Matt 7:1-5). The better place to start when we want to practice reconciliation and build unity is to pray for ourselves. Pray that God will remove from *you* whatever beliefs or feelings keep you separate from your neighbors and divide you from the body of Christ. When we do this, God will help remove the stumbling blocks in our hearts. Even if our disagreement remains, we will be able to approach our differences with more grace and peace. And that is a glimpse of the unity we will experience in the kingdom of God.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. *Amen.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Prayer written by Bishop Charles Henry Brent, missionary Bishop; poet; author; diplomat; ecumenist; soldier; athlete, musician and a friend to many during his 40+ year career as an Episcopal priest and world renowned churchman.