

“Unity in the Church”
Sermon Series – Christ: The Source of our Joy and Strength
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First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
February 17, 2019
(Phil. 4:1-4)

Introduction.

Last week at the Forum on Faith and Culture, which our church helped sponsor, the last person to present at the end of the day was Bishop Sir Walter Mack. He’s the senior pastor at Union Baptist Church which hosted the event, and Bishop Mack gave a sending sermon which called everyone at the Forum to pursue unity in the midst of the challenges of our racial differences. The opening illustration of his message was an interesting one.

Bishop Mack told us about a recent experience he had flying on an airplane, and he said that when he found his seat and turned into his row, he could tell that the woman in the seat next to his didn’t look all that happy that he was going to be her traveling companion. He didn’t know if that was because he was black or what the problem really was, but it was obvious that she wasn’t very comfortable with him sitting next to her. When he settled into his seat, she actually reached over and pulled the armrest down between their two seats as if to say, “I want there to be a barrier between us.” It was that uncomfortable for her.

They took off and were flying along, when all of a sudden during the course of the flight the airplane hit some turbulence. They encountered a pocket of air, and suddenly the woman was very afraid. And in her fear she instinctively reached over and grabbed Bishop Mack’s leg in order to steady her nerves. Both of them looked at each other, and they both smiled. All of a sudden these two people who started off by feeling distrustful of one another experienced a sense of oneness, and the gulf between them was bridged. The adversity of the air turbulence brought them together to form a bond.

Our world is marked by disunity these days. Humanity is fractured and fragmented, and at times it feels like the very fabric of our society is coming apart at the seams. Has there ever been a time since you’ve been alive when our country has experienced more acrimony and vitriol than we have in these last few years? Has there ever been a time when global peace felt more fragile and uncertain. We’re living in such challenging times, and it’s difficult to find unity anywhere.

And this isn't just the case out there in the world. It's in the church too. At the Forum on Faith and Culture we heard a number of speakers talk about the disunity in the body of Christ and the need for all of us to come together and work through our problems with one another. It's a message we all needed to hear.

The passage we've read this morning in Philippians 4 talks about the unity of the church of Jesus Christ, and I think it's a timely message for our congregation because of some tensions I have detected even within our own fellowship. I pray we will be open to whatever the Lord wants to say to each of us this morning by what I share as we study this passage today.

I. The Problem in the Church in Philippi.

Paul begins by saying, *“I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, my true yokefellow, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life”* (Phil. 4:2-3).

Who exactly are Euodia, Syntyche and Clement, and who is this unnamed “true yokefellow” Paul mentions? And what was the nature of their problem? While I've never personally met anyone named Euodia or Syntyche, the names of these women were actually common first-century names, sort of like being called Mary or Susan today. And their names literally meant “Success” and “Lucky” respectively. I think it indicates that their parents hoped their daughters would somehow make good in the world. But nothing else is really known about these women. They aren't mentioned anywhere else in the Bible, and the details about their problem are pretty minimal.

We also don't know who the Clement Paul mentions is, although some scholars have speculated that he may have been the Clement who later became the Bishop of Rome. But we really don't know for sure. And scholars have also speculated that the “true yokefellow” Paul mentions in this passage may have been Luke the physician who had been a missionary companion with the apostle. Historians believe he may have stayed on Philippi when Paul left the city to go to Thessalonica (see Acts 16). But again, we don't know for sure. What we do know is that these women had a problem with each other, and it was so serious that Paul felt the need to call them out and urge them to address their conflict.

Conflict is nothing new in the world, or in the church for that matter, and the people of God have had problems getting along since the beginning of time. Genesis 3 tells the story of conflict between our first parents, Adam and Eve, and we're still dealing with the effects of the Fall today. That story is quickly followed by the one in Genesis 4 about Cain and Abel, and the conflict and jealousy between them became so intense that Cain killed his younger brother. The

challenge of conflict has always been with us.

Many people have the mistaken notion that the first-century church was a more perfect expression of the body of Christ than the church is today, and they wistfully think that if we could just get back to the purity of first-century Christianity all would be well in the church. However, a simple reading of the letters in the NT reveals just how messed up and troubled the early church back then really was. For example, the church in Corinth fought over what to wear in worship, how to celebrate communion, and their leaders were lax on promiscuity. The church in Ephesus lost their first love, the one in Laodicea was lukewarm, and the congregation in Thyatira allowed idolatry to go unchecked.

The church back then was just as messed up and divided as churches are today, and we all need the help of the Lord to pursue the kind of unity He desires in the body of Christ. The fact of the matter is that the church isn't a museum for saints; it's a hospital for sinners. And all of us are broken people who struggle to get along and maintain love and unity in our relationships with one another. It was true in the church in Philippi, and it's true in our church today too. Fortunately, the Lord has given us His Holy Spirit who can bring transformation and healing, and He's also given us the body of Christ to hold us accountable and to help facilitate reconciliation whenever it is possible.

II. The Call to Unity in the Church.

Rather than leaving the two women to work out their problems on their own, Paul requested that the unnamed "yokefellow" help these women work through their differences. And the apostle encouraged them to seek unity in the church. The key to his exhortation is found where he urged them "*to be of the same mind*" (*Phi. 4:2*). This is a repetition of what Paul had already written earlier in the letter in Philippians 2 when he said, "*In your relationships with one another have the same mindset as Jesus Christ.*"

You'll recall that in that passage the apostle went on to write the beautiful Christian hymn about the humility and self-sacrificial nature of the Son of God, how Christ emptied Himself, made Himself nothing, and died in our place. What he says here in Philippians 4 hearkens back to what he wrote in chapter 2, and he's trying to remind them of the ultimate example of Jesus Christ who was humble and sought to bring reconciliation rather than assert His own rights. Our unity is based on Jesus Christ. He is our example, and He's our guide. And Paul says we should seek to have His mindset in trying to solve our problems and build unity in the church.

In the New Testament the church is described, among other things, as the household of God, the bride of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. All told, there are 96 different word pictures that have been identified in the Bible as

images of the church.¹ But the image that dominates the New Testament is the image of the body of Christ. Just as the human body isn't made up of one member but many, so the body of Christ has diversity in its unity. In addition, just as the human body requires the various members to be interdependent in order to function well, each of us in the body of Christ needs to work together to achieve the full expression of what God has in mind for the church in the world.

Have you ever had your arm fall asleep? I had a friend who once woke up in the middle of the night, and someone hit him in the face. He turned, and it happened again. It was then he realized that his arm had fallen asleep, and he was hitting himself! The church can be like that sometimes. Instead of working together, we beat each other up.

Sometimes the human body turns on itself, and the result is that people develop cancer, immune systems attack healthy organs, and the body is at war with itself. It's a great tragedy whenever that happens in our physical bodies, but it's an equal tragedy when it happens in the body of Christ. We're supposed to work together in mutual support and cooperation rather than being at war with one another, and the body is at its best when it comes together.

Have you ever noticed how interdependent and unified your body is when it's working properly? Both when you encounter adversity and when you experience joy, your whole body gets involved. For example, if you hit your thumb with a hammer, it isn't long before all the members of your body are mobilized to share in the pain. Your eyes get big, your mouth lets out a moan, your heart pumps more blood to the injured thumb, and your feet start jumping up and down. The whole-body rallies around the pain of the thumb.

The same is true with joy. For example, the next time you eat ice cream observe how your whole body gets involved. You take that first bite of Graeter's mint chocolate chip ice cream (my personal favorite!), and your eyes close in deep satisfaction. Your mouth smiles wide and mumbles yum-yum. And your whole body breaks into a little happy dance. In good times and in bad there is a unity in the body in how it responds when it's working well, and that should be instructive to all of us who are in the church which is the body of Christ.

III. The Challenge of Unity in the Church.

While maintaining the unity of the church is the clear call of God in Scripture, it has proven to be a great challenge to do this throughout the centuries. Sadly, the history of Christianity is marked by division, even from the very beginning. Factions and disagreements plagued the early church, just like they do churches today, and Paul addresses some of these problems in this letter to the Philippians. We also note that in other letters Paul wrote he had to defend his apostolic authority, he was often criticized, and his leadership was undermined on many

occasions by people in the church.

The first two missionaries – Paul and Barnabas – even had trouble getting along. At the end of their first missionary journey they broke fellowship and separated from one another in a disagreement over mission strategy and personnel. These examples reveal just how difficult it is to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, even when you’re trying to do the right thing and follow after God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great theologian who was martyred in Hitler’s Germany, wrote about the challenge of unity in the church in his little book *Life Together*. And in this book Bonhoeffer cautioned people not to have illusions about what the unity of the church is supposed to be like, and he explained that maintaining unity will always be a challenge. He said that unity in the church is never ideal, but it is nevertheless real, and it takes a great deal of work and sacrifice to seek it. You and I are different from one another, and we’re broken people who struggle to get it right.

Greg Ogden once said that the only thing we may have in common with the person in the pew next to us is that neither of us deserves to be there. God has come into our lives so that each of us has a story to tell, and what knits our hearts together is that we belong to Christ, not because we’re alike and not because we agree.²

Last weekend many in our church attended the play *Union* at the Stevens Center which told the story of the sanitation workers strike in Memphis in 1968. We also participated in the Forum on Faith and Culture which was about the issues of race, racial reconciliation, and racial justice. People from over 40 churches in our city came together to wrestle with these important matters, and there were times when, frankly, it felt uncomfortable, and it was hard to hear what some people said.

But we all tried to lean in and learn from one another because we realize that the challenge of our unity in the larger body of Christ should never be an excuse to run away and avoid our problems. Like Euodia and Syntyche we all need to stay engaged and work together for solutions to the problems in our society and in our church. The church is at its best when it works together, and a thumb by itself loses the full power of the hand.

IV. A Vision for Unity.

Last month several from our church attended our denomination’s national gathering in Colorado, and we heard a number of great speakers. Perhaps my favorite was an African American preacher from California named Albert Tate. He talked about the unity of the church from 1 Corinthians 12, and his opening illustration painted a picture that has stayed with me.

He said that in 1963 they gathered in buses, cars and church vans. They packed lunches in their coolers, and they scraped their resources together and headed to the Mall in Washington, DC. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had issued a clarion call to come to our nation's capital to lift up their voices and declare a vision for equality and justice for everyone in our country regardless of the color of their skin. They came from St. Louis, MO, Jackson, MS, and Birmingham, AL, and Cleveland, OH. They came from all parts of the country, and when they got there they put on little buttons and wore t-shirts that were passed out. They locked arms and sang songs as they marched together and gathered for a day of hope.

It was a long day, and there were many people who spoke from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The culminating moment of the Poor People's March would be when Dr. King took the platform. It was there that he gave his now famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Historians tell us that the part in his speech about his dream wasn't a part of the comments he originally prepared for the day. As he was writing his manuscript he thought about how he needed to convince people about the "why?" of Civil Rights. As a brilliant communicator he did a masterful job of weaving together sacred and cultural texts. He took the Scriptures, the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution, and he wove them together to offer his vision for why Civil Rights should matter to everyone.

As Dr. King concluded his remarks that day, the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson called out to him. Perhaps she could tell that the message hadn't had its desired effect. Maybe she knew the day needed a stronger ending. So she shouted, "Tell them about the dream, Martin! Tell them about the dream!" She had heard Dr. King speak on many occasions when she sang at his rallies, and she knew of the dream of which he had spoken many times before. So Dr. King began to speak from memory and he said, "I have a dream today!"

Albert Tate pointed out to us that Dr. King wasn't celebrated back then the way he is today. He was viewed as divisive in both the white and the black communities at the time. But we all resonated with the dream, didn't we? I think the reason is because deep in our souls we all have the same desire for unity that we would be one. Dr. King painted a picture of a vision for our nation in which the future generations of our children would all come together and be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. Dr. King would be the first to tell you that the vision he proclaimed that day wasn't really his vision. It was a vision he got from the King of kings – the Lord Jesus Christ. It was a biblical vision of what we he called "the beloved community."

Conclusion.

The Bible tells us that one day every tribe, tongue, nation, and people will be gathered around the throne of God, and together we will sing, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty, who was and is and is to come. Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive glory and honor and power and praise!” Scripture portrays a vision of reconciliation in heaven, and it’s a vision that we in the church are supposed to work toward with all our might while we’re still here on earth.

It will always be a challenge to experience unity in the church of Jesus Christ, and the devil loves to destroy and divide. But the call of Christ is clear, and in the power of His Holy Spirit we can pursue it. Our diversity and our differences of opinion will always be an opportunity for us to fight, but they can also serve as an invitation for us to unite and to seek reconciliation wherever possible.

Elsewhere in one of his epistles the apostle Paul counsels us, “*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone*” (Rm. 12:18). This is an admission that some people just won’t be willing to be at peace with us, it won’t be possible, and that’s okay. But insofar as we can we should make every effort to be at peace with people with whom we’re at odds. Who do you need to seek peace with today? Who is the one person God is laying on your heart this morning? Seek reconciliation, and God will be with you as you pursue unity in His church. Amen.

¹E. Best, *One Body in Christ*.

²Greg Ogden, *The New Reformation*, p. 37.