



Sermon, June 18, 2017
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

“Connected, United, or Untied?”

Scriptures:

Psalm 122

I was glad when they said to me,
'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'
Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together.
To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the Lord.
For there the thrones for judgement were set up,
the thrones of the house of David.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
'May they prosper who love you. Peace be within
your walls,
and security within your towers.'
For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, 'Peace be within you.'
For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your good.

1 Corinthians 12:3-13 (NRSV)

³ Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

A United Methodist Church leader once was speaking with a Free Methodist leader and asked him, "How free are 'Free Methodists?'" The Free Methodist leader replied, "About as free as 'United Methodists' are united."

Truth or error?

“Connected, United, or Untied?”

Several years ago, when I served the Sheridan United Methodist Church in Sheridan, Oregon, the local funeral director would put funeral notices up around the community to inform people of when the funerals were scheduled. One time I noticed that he had the following written about a funeral at which I was officiating: "Services at Sheridan Untied Methodist Church." I went and asked him if he had been attending our Administrative Council meetings in secret.

In this morning's scripture reading, the psalmist shouts out praise to "Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together." Our conference is bound firmly together through a variety of links: clergy, laity, camps, programs, Walk to Emmaus, Missions, UMW and UMM, youth gatherings, and our annual meeting together.

All of this is true at the same time that our wider denomination is trying to determine if it can stay together in spite of some major theological differences among us that affect how we interpret the Bible (and everybody interprets the Bible from their particular theological stance, *everybody*), as well as how we interpret our church polity, or how we organize ourselves as a denomination and affirm the gifts and callings of people in our fellowship.

That is the same situation that Paul encountered with the church at Corinth. You could characterize the Corinthian church as consisting of Gifts and Divisions. One gifted division were the Ecstatics who made a variety of utterances in worship:

- "Tongues": more emotional upwelling than actual speech
- "Prophecy": Some message for the community from God
- "Wisdom", "knowledge": teaching gifts
- "Working of miracles" or "mighty deeds"
- "Healing," etc. all these are showy, exciting sorts of gifts, esp. in a service of worship.

What if you did not have these flashy, ecstatic manifestations in worship? Were you less "gifted" by God than others? Divisions and factions, "schisms" arose. There tended to be a focus upon the person possessing the gifts, and people began to think of themselves as specially favored by God. You can see the problem.

Paul addresses this issue. He talks about "variety" (or assignment or distribution) of gifts (*charisms*= given by God). Focus is upon the gift, or even more, upon the Giver: God. It is through Grace that the person has these gifts. Variety or distribution of service. Every day acts of service are set on a par with the flashy ecstasies of worship. Varieties or distribution of working or operations or activities. There are many things to be done, and many ways of doing them.

But what is the purpose of all these gifts and service and workings? To build up the community or the "body" as Paul puts it. All these things are the "work" of the One Spirit. Notice: *it is the work of God*. It is at the initiative of God and the determination of God, NOT human beings. Everyone has a part to play, a place and importance in the One Body.

The gift of the Holy Spirit to the world is the Christian Community.

The church is an echo of the world from which we come: Wide diversity of experience, abilities, opinions, ideas, colors, body types, shapes, hairstyles, ages, etc. That diversity is meant to be reflected in the Christian community. The Origin of this diversity is the One God, the One Lord, the One Spirit.

The essential nature of the Church is unity. The Spirit produces diversity but springs from unity and the intention of that diversity is for the mutual benefit of all in the Christian fellowship. We have a common quest: growth in holiness, growth in truth, growth in love.

Unity is always found in the midst of diversity. And the reverse is also true: Diversity is always found in the midst of unity. Diversity in Christian community: Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Eastern and Russian Orthodox, Baptist, United Methodist, Evangelical, Presbyterian, etc. But there is still a basic unity which underlies this all.

Unity does not mean "sameness" or "homogeneity." If anything, unity emphasizes difference. "In-spite-of factor:" One way to think of this is to define unity as being "in spite of" diversity. And diversity exists as being "in spite of" unity.

Unity and diversity is the tension of our time. The temptation facing our society and the church is to stress *uniformity*. Homogeneity is a powerful church

growth principle. It often also translates directly into *uniformity*: of belief, of political persuasion, of behavior, of dress, of thought. It also contributes to the growth of bigotry and hostile prejudices within church communities. Recall Nazi Germany: purification of the race - uniformity and homogeneity.

A number of years ago, the Episcopal Church came up with a brilliant Ad campaign. One ad showed a picture of a head and the caption read: "It's okay, you don't need to check this at the door." It's okay to think, and to think differently. John Wesley: "In the essentials, unity. In opinions, we think and let think."

Pluralism: is the individual's grappling with issues of faith and life in the midst of a community whose life is lived in the presence and awareness of God.

The Church is of God!

It is not of human beings. This is so absolutely crucial to remember. It is not another social club. If we act like it is, we destroy the essence of the Church. It is not a political action committee. If we act like it is, we destroy the essence of the Church. It is not a gathering of perfect and upstanding citizens. If we act like it is, we destroy the essence of the Church, and we are deluding ourselves. The church is a gathering of people who have responded to the call of God and who in their diversity of gifts, opinions, experience and abilities are melded into one body, the Body which is Christ.

The Psalmist says, "For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, 'Peace be within you.'

For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your good."

How do we seek the good? What is the good we need to seek? These questions will engage us and our culture for several generations. The decisions we make, the things we do, and the lives we choose to lead will determine what Christianity will look like for the next 500 years. Our Connection as a denomination will change, but the deeper cords of love, and the reality of God's Grace-filled Presence will continue to bind us together. So, let us open ourselves more and more to the movement of the Holy Spirit as we move forward as a church, as a denomination, and as a world-wide faith. We exist to serve God and the world. So, let's go do it.