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18<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“One in the Spirit”

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## Psalm 133

*How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.*

## 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

*Now I appeal to you, 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 united in the same mind and the same purpose. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. 12 What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." 13 Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*

*I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.*

*This is the Word of the Lord*

## ***One in the Spirit***

*“Differences are not intended to separate, to alienate. We are different precisely in order to realize our need of one another” – Bishop Desmond Tutu*

This morning’s text calls us to wrestle with our differences. It also calls us to ask the question, “What does it mean to be the Church?” Sometimes the best way to understand what something is is to understand what it is not.

Paul wrote this letter to the church community in Corinth, a cosmopolitan port city on the Mediterranean Sea, in the heart of the Greco-Roman world. The population of this city was extremely diverse not only socially and economically, but also in terms of religious practice and ethnicity. People who lived in Corinth would have had many outward identifiers that might distinguish them from one another or divide the population. The church that Paul writes to in this letter, though likely a small congregation, would have reflected much of this local diversity in its membership.

And like in the culture all around them, the people who made up this church saw all the things that made them different from one another and began to draw lines of demarcation within the community based on these differences.

Paul stressed in his letter that the church is not a place for distinction or division, but one of union and belonging. He reminded the Corinthians that all the people of this church, no matter what teacher they might follow, no matter where they came from, or what they looked like, every one of them was baptized in the name of Christ. No other name, no other symbol holds as much power as that. Baptism is a sign of our union – our belonging – within something that is bigger than all that which divides us.

In my first year of Seminary, I felt like I was on another planet. In undergrad, I was a Theatre major. Now there is nothing wrong with being a theatre major, in fact in a lot of ways, it prepared me well for a life in ministry. But it didn’t exactly prepare me for Seminary. I had never taken a Philosophy class, or Theology, or Greek, or Hebrew. I didn’t even really know the Bible in English all that well.

I did know how to tap dance. I knew Shakespeare, and make-up, and where stage left was... but there I was, suddenly in the ivy-league world of Princeton, and well... I felt different from just about everyone else around me.

At the end of my first semester in Seminary, I had to meet with my faculty advisor for an evaluation. We met at a local coffee shop. She bought me a coffee, sat me down, and then she let me have it.

"I'm not sure why, but you seem to think that you are here by mistake." She began. "You did not get here by accident. So stop behaving as if you did. This is not a mistake" she said, "God has called you here."

My advisor, God bless her, was a brilliant woman. She helped me to see that God was calling me, and not in spite of the fact that I was different. God was calling me because I was different. We are all called because we are different. God is calling us to be different – and to be the church together. Paul reminds us that what makes us different is not meant to separate us from one another, but to make the church a stronger, more vibrant, more resilient community of people. There is room for all of our distinct and diverse selves within the unity of Christ.

But it's not always easy to see this. Often we get so focused on the ways in which we may see things, or experience things differently from each other within community that we begin to feel like we're under attack. We might even feel like we have to join together with others like us in order to protect a particular resource, a particular viewpoint, or a particular perspective.

Where are the lines of division in our congregation or in our community?

What are the constituencies or positions that we feel like we need to protect?

Students, children, young families, elders, long time members, newcomers, people who think the church's resources are to be invested and protected, and people who believe the resources of the church should be used and spent on others. The truth is, all of these groups, and all of these things are important and worth valuing and protecting, and from the very beginning, the Church has been called to struggle and wrestle and hold together these disparate and divergent points of view. That was exactly the point.

Scholar Mary Hinkle Shore writes that when Paul urges 'the same mind and the same purpose,' he may sound like someone who is simply uncomfortable with conflict, but he has something greater in mind than keeping the peace. The individual points of division in Corinth are merely... symptoms of an underlying problem: the Corinthians do not understand that through Christ, God open our ways of defining and valuing ourselves and one another.

Later in this same letter, Paul speaks of the Corinthians -- Jews and Greeks, slaves and free -- having been baptized into one body and drinking of one Spirit. All of our old forms of identity, our old ways of understanding ourselves and our neighbors are replaced by membership in the one body of Christ.

Belonging is not pulling ourselves out into groups of people that are just like us. Belonging is actually more clearly revealed we can be present in the larger community with all that might make us feel different from each other and still feel as though we belong with each other.

The word translated as “church” in much of Paul’s writing is “Ecclesia” or literally, “Those who are called” – called into community, called out to live a new and world-changing reality, called to belong together. This is what it means to be the church. In the community at Corinth, Paul recognized a gathering of people who had been called together by the Spirit, because of their differences, to be the church of Christ for that place and time.

The unifying factor is not about us. It’s about God. We belong together because we belong to God, not because we belong to any human group.

Shauna Hanna, in her work on Psalm 133, draws out the similar message we hear when we read this text in light of Paul's letter. "The unity this psalm calls for," she writes, "Is between Democrats and Republicans. It is between Christians and Muslims. It is between Palestinians and Israelis, and it may seem impossible... to us. Full harmony is possible because the source is God, and great things can come from this kind of unity.

The psalmist writes that unity is like oil. It is not just any oil, but precious oil, an extravagant blessing, so much oil that it runs down onto the beard of the anointed one, and onto to the hem of his robe. That is a lot of oil. It is wildly abundant... and probably more than a little bit messy. But this is a vision of what unity between divided peoples might be like when we begin to see one another not as adversaries on opposite sides, but as kindred spirits:

Beautiful, and messy, and extravagant.

The Normandy School district, just outside of Ferguson, Missouri, was, at one time, the worst district in the state, and easily one of the worst school districts in the country. It's the district where Michael Brown attended high school, the one

he graduated in shortly before he was murdered in 2014. In 2013, the district had gotten so bad that it lost its state accreditation, and was forced to provide transportation for students to another school in an accredited school system. There was only one catch. Normandy, which is more than 90% minority students, would only provide free transportation to one school: a school that was 30 miles away and nearly all white.

That fall, despite the distance, more than 1,000 students from Normandy chose to board buses at four o'clock in the morning and make the trek to Francis Howell High School, in pursuit of a better education.

Mah'ria Martin was one of those students. The previous spring, she and her mother Nedra had attended a town hall meeting where parents at their new school voiced their "concerns" about the safety of their children in the wake of this mass influx of students from the failing school district, students who were nothing like their own children. That first morning of the school year, Nedra was so worried about the kind of welcome her daughter, and her classmates might receive at Francis Howell that she got into her car and followed the school bus the 30 miles to the school gate, just to be sure Mah'ria was safe. What she saw when they arrived left her utterly flabbergasted. Hundreds of Francis Howell students were gathered at the entrance to the school, some holding signs, others standing in groups shouting out chants ... of welcome for the Normandy students.

It turned out, many of the students had heard about the outrage and fear expressed at the parent meeting, and they were horrified. So that morning, as the Normandy kids walked off the buses, the teachers and students from Francis Howell made their message clear:

"We want you to know that you are welcome here.

We want you to know that you belong with us."

Amen.