

*God, who called humble fisherman to follow you, help us also to hear your voice when you call, and to follow you with trust and recklessness. Amen.*

Some of you know that I am not the biggest fan of Paul, the preacher and church planter who wrote a bunch of letters that are now included in our New Testament. His writing is dense and confusing.

Plus, some of his writing has been taken out of context so many times to support viewpoints that are oppressive and sexist, and clearly against the teachings of Jesus... in my opinion, Paul is both the absolute best and the absolute worst thing that ever happened to Christianity.

Paul carries a lot of baggage.

Well, write this one down, folks.

Today, I'm going to preach on one of the letters of Paul.

In our lesson from Corinthians today, Paul writes, "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."

In the past two and a half months, there have been countless calls for unity.

The election is over, so let's forget about the hateful rhetoric that has been dividing our country for the past few years, and move on.

What's most important is a peaceful transfer of power.

To many people, those calls to unity ring hollow.

If you are a person of color, you can't simply forget being dehumanized by the man who was just inaugurated as the president of the United States.

If you are queer, you can't simply ignore that fact that elected leaders have vowed to take away your right to marry, to adopt the children you are raising, to sit at the hospital bedside of your loved one, or even just go to the bathroom.

If you are a Muslim or an immigrant, you can't pretend as though you haven't been treated as a terrorist by the media, our elected officials, and TSA agents every time you want to travel.

If you have any medical condition that would count as a pre-existing condition, (such as COPD or diabetes, depression or arthritis, cancer, or – in my case – a slipped disc in your lower back) – how can you not be concerned about the calls to make you ineligible for any health insurance coverage in the future?

If you are a woman, how can you possibly feel safe when the most powerful man in the world has normalized sexual assault and objectification of women, and is already being imitated by others?

Some voices call for unity.

Some people *cannot bear* to hear those calls for unity, because they mean giving up or denying something that makes them who they are.

Our differences matter very much. They are what define us as individuals.

We *cannot* and *should not* deny our race, culture, country of origin, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, physical ability, economic status, or anything else that defines us as a person. To do so would be to deny God's good work of creation. Each one of us was created by God, and each one of us is good. Nothing any politician says can change that.

But politicians *can* change the rules of society and make some of us into second- or third-class citizens. They *can deny* our importance as beloved children of God, created in God's image.

So. What to do with all of this?

Paul calls for unity and an end to quarreling or bickering.

But in today's social and political climate, we know that differences do, indeed, matter – and in fact, differences are crucial to creating a diverse and accepting and whole society, that can represent all of it's citizens!

In other words, for many of us, we *cannot* accept that our disagreements fall into the category of what Paul calls “quarrels” or “bickering.”

Our arguments are not petty or trivial. These discussions and debates are central to our identities and who we believe God made us to be.

So. Paul calls for unity. And so do countless media outlets and columnists and favorite aunts or cousins or best friends from high school.

Thankfully, Paul also gives us an answer to this conundrum.

*Unity does not mean uniformity.*

Paul doesn't want to make everyone be identical.

In fact, the biggest racial or cultural issue in the churches that Paul started was between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Since God had first come to the Jewish people, and since Jesus himself was Jewish, and the sign of following God – at least for men – was becoming circumcised... did Gentile men need to become Jewish before becoming Christian? In other words, did they need to get circumcised before they could follow Jesus?

If everyone is supposed to be identical, the answer should be yes.

In order for all Christians to be the same, even the Gentiles would need to be circumcised before they could follow Jesus.

But that's not the answer that Paul gives.

Jesus *doesn't* need us all to be identical. Jesus values our individuality.

Those of you who have been coming to the Bible study on Romans have heard this already – but it was quickly determined in the earliest churches that communities of Jesus-followers were glad to have more people join their ranks! It didn't matter who those people were or where they came from. Their commitment to the teachings of Jesus overcame any other differences, including whether or not they had been circumcised. Most important was the fact that they now shared a mission and a purpose, as a united community.

The call to unity in First Corinthians is not a call to uniformity – Paul and Jesus aren't asking us to deny those things that make us who we are.

We are still allowed – encouraged, even – to be the best version of ourselves that we possibly can be. We can and should and must be women, men, black, Hispanic, gay, trans, Hmong, immigrant, straight, white, differently abled, Native American, and whatever else we know that we are. We are not all alike, nor do we need to be.

Following the call to unity requires us to recognize not just our own identity, but to also notice those things that we *do* have in common with other people. Our similarities can be even more important than those other things that define us.

Yesterday, in every single state in the USA, and on every single continent – yes, including Antarctica – there were people marching to advocate for basic human rights.

The marchers were Muslim and Christian and atheist, they were African and African-American, young and old and everywhere in between, in wheelchairs and walking with canes and being pushed in strollers, carrying signs and wearing t-shirts or sometimes no shirts at all.

I was blessed to attend the march in Madison yesterday, and I saw many folks from our congregation and our community there.

The millions of people who marched yesterday came together with the belief that what unites us is stronger than what divides us.

We don't have to give up our basic human rights in order to extend them to others. All we have to do is see the humanity in the other person, and work for ways for them to be the best version of themselves, just like we want to be able to do ourselves.

The people in the church in Corinth were fighting over who was more important, based on who had baptized them.

Paul says, get over it, people! The point is that *you are baptized*. You have decided to join this community of faith and action. So stop it with the petty arguments and get on with the action!

You don't have to give up your individual personhood – you don't have to deny your personal experience or identity. But there is big stuff going on here – things that are bigger than you, bigger than me, bigger than any of us had ever imagined.

Christianity was arguably the most influential movement ever known to the world. Like Paul, it has been wonderful sometimes and it has been terrible sometimes. But no one can deny its impact.

In the baptismal rite today, we ask six questions of the parents and sponsors and congregation, and the person about to be baptized, if they can speak for themselves:

Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?

Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?

Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?

Do you believe in God the Father?

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

We will ask these questions of you in just a few minutes. And they are the *only* questions that matter, for the sake of unity, according to Paul.

Do you renounce evil? Do you believe in God?

If so, let's get going. We have work to do.

According to the baptismal promises, our job now is to learn to trust God, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace.

There is no need to give up your individual personhood to be like others... there is only the need for each individual person to support the whole. And I think that is something we can agree on regardless of all those other things that define us.

Do you believe in basic human rights? Do you believe that every single person has been created in the image of God? Do you believe that everything God made is good? Do you believe that God offers forgiveness of sins?

Then stop your quarrels and your bickering.

We can make more of a difference when we work together.

It's time for all of us to live out our baptismal promises.

Paul preached a message of unity – but not uniformity.

He didn't expect Gentile believers to get circumcised before being baptized.

For us, that means that we don't have to deny our gender or race or political affiliation or national origin in order to stand up for basic human rights for all people.

So let's pull together, as Paul encouraged the church in Corinth to do.

And, just like Paul, Christ called *all* of us to proclaim the Gospel.

The Gospel that says that Black lives matter.

The Gospel that says that women's rights are human rights.

The Gospel that says that love is love...

And on and on.

Now I appeal to you, dear ones, 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.

Be the best version of yourself. And bring your own unique and important voice to the table, so that everyone can be heard, as we move forward together, seeking a higher purpose.

May God bless and guide us as we seek to proclaim the Gospel.

Amen.