

“Unity in Faith”

May 22, 2016

Who Cares about Unity? Series – Trinity

Unity has been our buzzword over the past couple of weeks. As we voted last week to merge with Lakeside, we come together - not because we are the same - but because we seek to carry out the mission of Jesus Christ and build the Kingdom of God.

In just a few weeks, our West Michigan Annual Conference will meet with Detroit Annual Conference as we move toward becoming one Michigan Conference. We seek unity in carrying out the mission of Jesus Christ across the state. And maybe you watched or read about our global gathering of General Conference in Portland, Oregon.

Unity wasn't the first word to come out of General Conference, but as I listened to colleagues and read posts, my prayer continues to be that we will seek to be together - in unity - but not the same.

One delegate said that he sees our unity in the church around our desire to share the Gospel, be grounded in Scripture, driven by the Holy Spirit, committed to Christ, reaching out, and all the while holding up our diversity – even our theological diversity - as a gift. God does not call us to uniformity, but to unity, and it can only be achieved by God's grace working through us. We can't make it happen alone.

Our faith in Jesus Christ leads us, but we rely on God's help when we seek unity. We come from different places, backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences, and it's important that we take time to get to know each other, to listen, and to share our faith stories. We trust that the Holy Spirit will move in ways that help us serve God and others more faithfully.

Today you received a card with instructions on “how to build a better life.” If we follow the directions, we'll find that it takes more than “me” to live my faith. We have to change “me” to “we.” We live our faith together.

Faith means being sure of the things we hope for and knowing that something is real even if we do not see it. We gather for worship on Sunday, meetings at other times, prayer times, meals, at any given time - and we bring our faith with us. Remember the acronym for FAITH – for all I trust him or find assurance in trusting God.

One of the best parts of my calling as pastor is to hear faith stories. I love to hear how people end up coming to church. Today we welcome 11 people into membership. One of them will be baptized. Some are professing faith publicly and joining a church for the first time. Some are transferring their membership from another church. Some

are coming back into membership in the local church after a time away. Their faith in God hasn't been absent, but we celebrate that they've found a place here.

Some found their way here by being a part of youth group. Some have served on mission trips where their faith has deepened. Some are here because of community activities that they attended. Some are here because someone brought them. Some are here because they moved into our community and looked for a United Methodist Church. But they all have one thing in common - this is the spiritual home where they will live out their faith in Christ.

I hope their stories help us remember why we're here, too. How did we end up here, and why are we still here? Every time we receive new members in the church, all of us who witness it reaffirm our faith. We're challenged to step up and stand up and recommit our lives to what is essential - faith in one God who is revealed to us as Creator, Christ our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit who is with us.

We already said what we believe this morning. The Apostles' Creed is a statement of faith shared by Christians around the world. We lift up God in three persons - the Trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

The Trinity is one of the most difficult and confusing theological concepts to grasp. I've heard it compared to the different states of water - ice, liquid, and steam. And if you want a really big word to use, it's "perichoresis," which comes from the Greek and literally means "dancing around" or "dancing in a circle." Since the third century, perichoresis has been used to describe this dance of God Three-in-One. And we're invited to place our faith in God - Triune and steadfast - and join the dance!

Paul attempts to offer some understanding to the church in Rome. He begins with the truth that it's faith alone that makes us right with God. It's not correct doctrine or right belief - it's faith. And then he brings Jesus in - the Risen One who offers salvation and peace. He reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the One who fills our hearts with love for God and others.

So we hold our experience of God and walk with others who each have a unique experience of God. No wonder it's difficult sometimes! Even among those who take membership vows today, I'm certain there are differences of opinion because of different experiences. It was John Wesley who is credited with saying, "As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think."

Another phrase that may help us is: "Unity in the essentials. Liberty in the non-essentials. Charity in ALL things." Wesley was concerned with building community among people, and we should be, too. We can find division and divisiveness anywhere - in the political realm any many other places, but it's very difficult to find unity and community where people can share life together - even their differences. It is our role

as the people of God to make sure that we're living in ways that show others the value of community, of relationship, of love just as God has shown us.

We are a family bound together by love and loyalty - not to a particular issue or way of doing things - but love and loyalty to Christ. One of our bishops said to the General Conference, "If we treat one another other than fully human, truly Christian, and beloved by God, why should anyone (and I would add, why would anyone) want to be a part of it?"

Friends, it's urgent work for us - to live what we promise. Today we'll promise to God as we welcome new people into community - to increase their faith, confirm their hope, and perfect them in love. I pray we would take it to heart as much as we ever have.

Paul is clear to lift up the joy of living in God's grace, but he's also truthful about what a life of faith means. We're looking forward to the joy of eternal life, but then he goes through a litany that connects suffering with hope: suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope. Why would we want to deal with suffering?

I struggle with this passage, although I've come to a place where I think I'm getting what Paul is trying to say. This is a call to perseverance and endurance. This is a call to understand the nature of faith for what it is – not just something we pull out when things aren't going well, but a deeper sense of trust in God's covenant with us in Jesus Christ. Easy to say, but not so easy to do.

About a week ago, a loved one called me to tell me that she lost her job after working at the same organization for almost 20 years. How do you and I react when we feel that those we love have been wronged? I was angry and proceeded to talk about how wrong it was. After a little bit of my rant, my loved one jumped in and said, "Just calm down. I'm really OK. Maybe this is a good thing. Maybe this is a part of something new for me."

Well, that reaction will take the wind out of your sails! She demonstrated some of what Paul is saying here. Endurance is not a word we like to hear because it means that we have to wait. We like instant results. We like quick gains. We like fast, right now, no lines, no waiting. We like pleasure now – rather than waiting for something better later on.

Endurance in faith means that there will be suffering and pain. Endurance comes through suffering. That's difficult to hear! But we claim the promises of God – because God is always working for the good. We need to worship together. We need to share our struggles and the faith that lives in us so that others can find strength to endure.

Our witness means something in the community of faith. When you and I speak of our faith and even the struggles of faith, we're showing honesty and integrity. We share the truth that we know about the mystery of faith, the awe of God's presence, the pain of suffering, and the grace that is very real to us. We're showing faith in God for what it is – waiting on the Lord even when the outcome is unclear.

Friends, we are saved from fear and saved for faith – focusing on God. Even when we feel threatened, when circumstances bring us down, Paul encourages us to be confident in God. We struggle with doubt and fear, but what matters is where we end up. Paul says we end with hope.

God is always faithful even when we are not. God does not forsake us. God does not give up on us. Paul speaks of standing firm in the Lord – of waiting for the Lord. We're always on the journey of deeper faith and trust in God. Standing firm is saying "yes" when it's easier to say "no" or to say nothing at all. It's being ready – always practicing our faith. It's taking the time to respond to God's grace in tangible ways – worship, fellowship, study, prayer. This is about endurance and commitment.

To live in covenant with God is a radical call and challenge. It is not easy. But if we believe in God's promises and want to build God's kingdom even now, then we have to live in a way that shows love and sacrifice. We stand firm in Christ and hope for transformation in our lives even now.

Friends, God is faithful. God can be trusted. God says "yes" to you and to all the world in Jesus Christ. God invites us to say "yes" and believe in God's promises, to hope, and to endure in faith with God's help.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

From Bailey Umstead:

Being baptized and becoming a member of the church, to me means that I'm taking my final steps in my journey to accepting God. I still have a long road to go but this is the beginning of the end in a way.