

“JESUS CHRIST IS ONE”

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Third Sunday after Epiphany (Series A)

January 22, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for the Third Sunday after Epiphany comes from *Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 1, verses 10 through 18. It is on page 807 of the pew Bible. In this epistle lesson, Paul addresses the issue of divisions within the congregation. Please stand as you are able for the epistle lesson. From 1 Corinthians 1, we begin reading at verse 10.

¹⁰I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹²What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." ¹³Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

¹⁸For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Jesus Christ is not divided. Jesus Christ is one. Let me use an illustration: Jesus doesn't have a foot over here that wants to play soccer, a hand over there that wants to play tennis, and another hand over there that wants to have a snowball fight. His body is one, and so is his Church, because the Church is the body of Christ.

Jesus Christ is not divided. Jesus Christ is one. But the members of the congregation in Corinth were acting like Jesus was divided. And we can learn a lot from how Paul deals with their problem. Whenever members of a congregation quarrel with each other or even disagree, we act like Jesus' body is sliced up into different pieces and distributed among us to do whatever we want with.

I know that seems like a crude illustration, but it's the one Paul uses.

This is what seems to be true whenever we quarrel and disagree. But the fact of the matter is this: Jesus Christ cannot be divided. It's impossible to do. We are all members of one body, even when we act like we are not.

So Paul deals with the divisions in Corinth, not by commanding them to *create* unity, but by reminding them of the unity that *already exists* by virtue of their baptisms, and commanding them to live in accordance with it.

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The instructions Paul gives to the church in Corinth are applicable to all Christian congregations, because, believe it or not, every congregation has some amount of division within it. And you know what? Trinity Free Lutheran Church is no exception. We have divisions.

Any time we put two or more sinners together, we will have some level of division. Relative to other divisions we observe, it might be a lot, or it might be a little. But it's there. And it's not good. It doesn't really matter how we compare to other congregations. We are what we are, regardless of what everybody else is. We have divisions, and we should not be okay with it. And the reason we should not be okay with it is because Jesus Christ is not divided, and we are members of him.

One of the common illustrations Paul uses for the church is the imagery of a body (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12)—you know—with eyes, ears, a mouth, hands, feet, *et cetera*. He refers to the congregation as the body of Christ (12:27).

All the different members of a body have different functions. Feet would have a difficult time performing the task of your eyeballs, and your eyeballs would have a difficult time performing the task of your feet, and they probably shouldn't try. In the same way, we have different functions in the congregation, but no one member is more important than another. We need each other, and we value one another.

Something we learn from this illustration is that even though the members of the body are all different, they are united in one common purpose. If you're playing tennis, and one of your feet wants to play soccer, and one of your hands wants to have a snowball fight, while the rest of the body is playing tennis, you're going to be a really bad tennis player, and you're going to lose. Your body parts need to agree with each other.

And it's the same way in the congregation—in the body of Christ. So Paul says to the Corinthians, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1:10).

Paul commands all the members of the Corinthian congregation to agree. Their disagreements and divisions were bad. And every Christian congregation—on some level—has the same problem. We have divisions, and these divisions are bad.

Now, I realize this might sound a bit strange in our pluralistic and inclusive society, where differences in opinion and belief are celebrated as good things. Some forms of diversity are good. We are different people with different functions and different abilities, and this is good. We return to the illustration of the body. Every member of a body is different. But they don't have their own individual minds. Each body has one mind. And this is also true for the body of Christ.

Some forms of diversity are good, but not all of them. Our different beliefs and opinions are not good. So Paul commands the members of the Corinthian congregation to agree, and to be “united in the same mind and the same judgment.”

In the body of Christ there is one mind, and we are to be united in it. In this congregation—in Trinity Free Lutheran Church—there is one mind, and we are to be united in it.

As you sit there in the pew and listen to this, you might be thinking to yourself, *Well, pastor, that's convenient for you, because you get to be the mind*. You know what? I don't. I really

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don't. At most, I get to be a mouth in this body of Christ. And a good mouth doesn't make up his own words. A good mouth speaks exactly what the mind instructs the mouth to speak. So if I'm not the mind, who is? It's Christ, isn't it? "He is the head of the body" (Col. 1:18).

So the mouth doesn't create the message. This is why I won't let you call me a "vision casting leader." And when you ask for my vision for the church, I won't give it to you. Pastors do not cast visions for their congregations. That is Jesus' job, and he has revealed it in Holy Scripture. My job is simply to proclaim that to you.

So I'm not the mind; you're not the mind; Jesus is the mind. And we are to be united in this one mind. Paul commands the Corinthians to all agree.

But this is easier said than done, isn't it? Perhaps you have heard someone say, "Let's just agree to disagree." I've decided that the next time someone says this to me—if I care at all about the issue, and if I think the right answer is actually important—I'm going to say *no*, partly because I want to see the reaction, but primarily because this passage teaches us to just say *no*.

We do not have to agree to disagree. In fact, we should not. Instead, we should agree to agree. And, I admit, this is hard—very hard. But that does not mean we shouldn't try. Seeking agreement with one another is an act of love. And it's an expression of the unity we already have in Jesus Christ. We are united with one another through him. We already have the same mind.

So the first thing for us to realize as we seek agreement with one another, is that we already are united, and we do have the same mind. The problem is that sometimes we're not very good at listening to that mind. We prefer our own minds over God's. This is how it has been since the fall into sin. But God has revealed his mind to us in the Holy Scriptures. And this is a revelation we can trust. It will not guide us wrongly. So we recognize the gift God has given us in the Holy Scriptures, and we submit to that teaching.

Now, this does not instantly solve all our problems. We might still have disagreements. And it is important for us to work through them in a respectful manner. If we believe there really is such a thing as truth, and if we believe the truth actually matters, then we must talk about our disagreements. In fact, it would be incredibly selfish and unloving not to.

Let's consider a hypothetical. Suppose I'm wrong about something. Suppose I tell you that Jesus evolved from ... glittery unicorns. That would be a false teaching, and you know it is a false teaching. It would be sinful for you to not say something to me about it. You would be allowing me to live in error, and you would be allowing me to spread it around to the rest of the body, like a disease. Your silence could hurt us all. You need to say something, and you need to say it to me.

It won't work to speak to everyone else about it. That's just gossip.

And this is how a lot of divisions start—by gossip. And I'm guilty of this. When I hear something I disagree with—not something from any of you; I talk to you directly about it—but maybe something from another pastor in the AFLC. If I disagree with it, I find it very difficult to confront to that person. It's much easier to find some likeminded individuals, whom I think will agree with me. And they usually do, because we are likeminded. Then we feel good about ourselves in our little echo chamber. But if I never speak to the person I disagree with, I continue to allow for at least one of us to be wrong. He might be wrong, or I might be wrong,

but if I don't say something, I basically ensure that at least one of us will continue to be wrong. And this is wrong—morally.

What we need to do, in order to have agreement and be united in the truth, is confront one another in love.

So what does it mean to confront one another in love? It means we tackle our disagreements for the purpose of *helping* the person we disagree with. A loving debate is where we attempt to persuade our opponent—for lack of a better word—instead of attempting to destroy him or her. And we even leave open the possibility that they might know something we don't know. We seek to persuade *and* learn. If I know the truth, I have a moral obligation to give it to you, so I seek to persuade. And if you know the truth, then you need to give it to me, so I must seek to learn as well as persuade.

And winning doesn't matter, because we are united with one another through Jesus Christ. And if we are united with one another, then we benefit from one another's health. It's like a hand helping a mouth be a better mouth.

We seek to grow together, and confess the truth together. And when this happens, it's wonderful.

One of the ways this happens is in our creeds and confessions. Every Sunday we confess together one of the three historical creeds—the Apostles', the Nicene, or, occasionally, the Athanasian Creed. When we confess these creeds together, we are united with one another in that confession. But there's even more than that. We are also united with other Christians all around the world, and even throughout time. These are global creeds that even transcend time. So when we confess the creeds together, think about this: we are united in one voice with Christians of all places and all times. This is a marvelous gift. And the reason we have this marvelous gift, is because our fathers in the faith, during the third, fourth, and fifth centuries—they refused to tolerate false teaching. They cared enough about the truth to hash it out and come to a common confession. And this is their heritage to us.

We also have this gift in our Lutheran confessions—like the *Small Catechism* and the *Augsburg Confession*. And, admittedly, it is a smaller group of Christians that confess these, but it's a deeper and bolder unity.

If everyone who identifies as a Christian decides that we should all just focus on the things we can all agree on, we won't agree on very much. We would have unity with no content, and it would be worthless. We wouldn't even agree on who Jesus is, and we would cease to be Christians.

So, as we seek to know the truth and to grow in it, we strive for a bold and specific confession. We continue to confess the three historical creeds with the universal Church, and we confess the Lutheran confessions with other Lutherans. We have unity in these creeds and confessions.

Some will argue that we shouldn't focus on doctrine so much, because doctrine divides. And they're actually right. Doctrine does divide. But it also unites. It does both. So what does doctrine divide us from? Well, good doctrine—that is, biblical doctrine—divides us from false teaching. And this is actually good.

And then doctrine unites us. It unites us in the truth. This is also good. This is why the adult Sunday School class is studying the *Augsburg Confession*—so we can know our confession of

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faith and be united in it—so that there be no divisions among us, and that we be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

This is what we do to take that unity that already exists, by virtue of our baptism into Jesus Christ, and make it visible. Then as one body we work together to make Christ known among ourselves and to a lost and dying world.

I hope this is something we all want. I hope this is something we are all willing to work toward. But we should also realize, there is much more to this epistle lesson than a command. There is a reality presented here. The reality is that we are baptized into one body. The reality given to us is Jesus Christ. We are baptized into his death and resurrection.

If there is one truth we can all learn and agree on this morning, it should be this: that we are all baptized into Jesus Christ—into his death and resurrection. This is the basis for our unity with one another. This is what creates our unity. And this, finally, is how Paul deals with the divisions in Corinth.

He reminds them of their baptism into Jesus Christ, and he reminds them of the cross. The cross is where our selfish and stubborn sinful natures—along with all the sins we actually commit—the cross is where all of that is put to death and forgiven in Jesus Christ. And our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection is where we find our identity as forgiven children of God.

This is where we learn how God looks at us. God does not measure our performance based on anything in us. He does not measure our performance by the number of sins we commit or the good works we perform. God measures us by our baptism into Jesus Christ. When God looks at you, he sees Jesus Christ. And when God looks at us—a broken and divided group of people—he sees the same thing. He sees one Jesus Christ, for we are all baptized into the same Jesus Christ.

This is a reality. We are one in Jesus Christ, and this is why we are commanded to agree with one another. May we strive to make this reality known among us more and more as we wait for the glorious day when Christ will return, raise his fallen saints, and transform us all in body and soul. On that day, all of Christ’s believing saints will, with one voice, praise our God and Savior Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is one, and we are one in him. Amen.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all (2 Cor. 13:14). Amen.