

## Week Four: “We are the Church; Unity”

King of Glory Lutheran Church

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<sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>4</sup>I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup>for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind — <sup>6</sup>just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you — <sup>7</sup>so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup>He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup>God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

<sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. <sup>12</sup>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." <sup>13</sup>Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? <sup>14</sup>I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup>so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. <sup>16</sup>(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) <sup>17</sup>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.

<sup>18</sup>For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

God's grace and peace be to you this day, from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Messiah. Amen!

This is week four of our sermon series “We are the Church”, and the topic is ‘Unity.’ We didn’t choose this theme because there is great discord within our congregation. I don’t want to hear any rumors in the coming days that Pastor Ruth Ann said we’re all fighting and KOG is a mess! That’s not the purpose. My intent is to offer some faithful insight around what unity looks like in our setting and how that might correlate to the division we are currently experiencing in other places of our lives.

Because the opposite of unity is division and there is plenty of that going around today. In fact, if I mentioned certain topics, I’m guessing we all could get in some hot arguments and be here until midnight tonight! Anybody want to argue about that?

Yet, on the other hand, whenever there is tragedy, like for the victims of Hurricane Ida, we quickly see the power of human unity. People unite, even strangers to one another, in helping clean up or get to safety or simply give some encouragement. Is there an Amen to that?

It’s kind of ironic, isn’t it, that in order to speak of unity, we often clarify it, or illuminate it, or imagine unity after we’ve seen or experienced the hazards of division.

Today, I want to talk about the church. Paul, writing in First Corinthians had plenty to say to the early church about being unified in our Lord Jesus Christ. The early church wasn’t in its

honeymoon stage very long. Right away, both Peter and Paul were both trying to preach the Gospel and figure out how to hold together Jesus' early followers. There were disparate groups with plenty of opinions. People who had grown up as faithful Jews weren't so certain they wanted to include new Gentile (unbelieving) converts to Jesus' Way of life.

It's disheartening to hear Paul in so many of his New Testament letters try to encourage, exhort, command or just plain wag his finger in the direction of people who were straying away from the ways of Jesus. The issues were numerous: food, circumcision, financial giving to widows and on and on.

Yet, on through the ages there has been plenty of church conflict. Our predecessor of this Christian body called Lutherans, Martin Luther, had to run for his very life after being called a heretic and an outlaw by his own Catholic colleagues. Under a death threat Luther hid in Wartburg Castle. Yet while there, Luther translated the Greek New Testament into German so the common person could read God's Word – a work of unification.

In our own lifetimes, we've seen the divisions. You might remember when our parents or grandparents thought the world would end if a Catholic and a Methodist got married! Oh, if they only knew what was coming. The church has fought over divorce, female clergy, homosexuality, Holy Communion, hymnody, worship styles, coffee, and most importantly, what color the sanctuary carpet should be! Oh, holy goodness, what humans can find to fight about!

What does unity in the church look like? Scripture has plenty to say about being unified in our faith, one of those texts being this first chapter in First Corinthians.

Paul begins his first letter to the church at Corinth by stating who they already were in Christ Jesus and what gifts that gave them. He says, 'You've been made holy, you have God's grace, you've been given every spiritual gift you'll ever need, you will be strengthened by Jesus and you have fellowship with God. All of this is because of who you are in our Lord, Jesus Christ!'

Think of that! Reflect upon that for just a moment for we, the people of God, in Jesus Christ right now, today. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we are made holy – set apart for a distinct purpose of bringing God's light to the world. We have God's grace – unmerited, unearned, - we are given the grace of God. Grace is forgiveness! Grace is second chances! Grace is a new start without strings attached! Where else do we experience that? Very few places, yes? What a gift!

Furthermore, in our Baptisms, God grants us every spiritual gift we'll ever need. Wisdom, strength, joy in God's presence....all gifts to strengthen our inner selves as we encounter the challenges and hardships of this world. What joy do we have in this incredible relationship with Jesus our Lord!

Paul – in those first verses, is trying to tell good people, God following people, that our relationship with Jesus is to be at the very center of our minds, actions, thoughts, words, imagination, each and every day! His is the relationship that will and does change every other relationship we have. Hear that again. God’s relationship with us, is what has the power to change every other relationship we have.

Paul also wonders why these good church going folk have begun to parcel themselves out to other leading disciples. Some of you say, “I belong to Paul!” “I belong to Peter!”

Of course, it’s natural and normal for us to make comparisons between politicians, teachers, doctors, and preachers too! We like one style or one person’s theology more than another. It is not about who is delivering the message. It is the message – The Good News of Jesus! The cross must not be emptied of its power - the message of Jesus Christ.

Being unified means we keep Jesus Christ at the center of all we do. Perhaps the image is of a large circle with Jesus standing in the middle. Some people might want to hold hands because they feel a friendship or fellowship with others. Other people agree to make the commitment to be in the circle – they don’t want to hold hands. That’s ok! Being unified around our Lord, doesn’t mean we all agree. We can have diverse opinions even about church and still be united. The difference is this. It is Jesus we stand around. It is the cross that we all stand under. The life, teachings, death, and resurrection are what unites us as God’s people. That will never change and that is what we must hold front and center.

What that means is this. If we’re in disagreement with another person in this congregation, we work to stay in relationship with them because of our mutual relationship with God. To be simplistic God loves them, God loves you, therefore we work on the relationship, even if we disagree.

You and I might not like a person or their opinions very much. In fact, that person might just drive us up a wall. But....because they are a child of God, we can still love them. We love them through Jesus Christ. We say to ourselves, “Because God loves that person, that makes me their sister or brother, not by blood, but by what Jesus did for all of us. Therefore, I don’t have to like them, but I can still love them through my Lord. Jesus will help me do that.”

I’ll admit, it’s easier said than done. But how can we walk away from who we are in Jesus? We cannot! Our unity comes from the relationship God makes with us, not we with God. Listen again, our unity comes from the relationship God makes with us, not we with God.

What Jesus did for us, each one of us, will be emptied of its power, if we do not take it seriously. Christ didn’t die just for me. Christ died for all. That is where we find our unity.

Amen.