

Unity in Jesus

Scripture: Acts 4:32 – 35 and John 17:21

1/29/23

During WWII many people planted 'Victory Gardens'. In fact, many towns established places within their communities where different people could plant some vegetables. They would pay a small fee to be used to support the war and neighbors would cultivate a small garden area for their use and others use. They would share gardening tools, water, and fencing. By pooling their resources, neighbors could would form a network of resources. At harvest time, those who had an abundance of one kind of vegetable, they would share it with others so everyone had enough.

The 'Victory Garden' was a beautiful thing and so can be our relationship with each other and our stewardship. In our scripture reading from Acts, Luke describes the united community of the early church. As more believers in Jesus were added to their number, they become more united in their hearts and minds. A beautiful description of unity is found in this passage.

But in addition to spiritual unity, they also shared everything they had. Some disciples were moved to give generously of their own resources and property to assist those in need. By participating in fellowship, serving together, and helping each other; they grew a beautiful spiritual fruits of kindness, generosity, and love.

So instead of focusing on our own gardens, may we grow in size and in stewardship. May our efforts, resources, and goals let us tend to our church families and by the grace of God, may it produce something beautiful!

What community garden is available to us? What victory garden can we plant and share? How can we share in the work of this ministry? And what spiritual fruits may we harvest?

Having served as a pastor in three different congregations in 30 years of ministry, I have a great love for the church. Yet in my work I have seen and experienced much to be concerned about.

The night before Jesus went to the cross, Jesus prayed for the unity of his people. He prayed for the church so that they would be one. At the turn of the 20th century, there were some 2,000 Christian denominations worldwide, but today there are 10,000 denominations worldwide. Clearly, the Christian church has used this motto in the 20th century – ‘Differences make a difference!’ And for the Christian Church, these differences tend to divide us.

Many of the differences between denominations are significant and I am not suggesting that the existence of different denominations is necessarily a bad thing. Nevertheless, this high degree of division is not ideal! Instead, what we have called to rally around as our point of community is described by Paul in Corinthians 15:3 – 4

‘I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the scripture said. Christ was buried and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as scripture said.’

Please notice that Paul says this is ‘most important’. This is the common ground we can all stand on. But the question for us is ‘How exactly can we do this?’

First, we must remember that our Savior brought us with His own blood. And second, the good news of Jesus gives us a mission to unite around.

This unity occurs on two levels – the local church level and the global church level. Our focus is on the local church level. Within any local church family there will always be differing opinions about the concerns facing the people there. So we must prepare ourselves to work through the resulting disagreements.

The journey to live in oneness is fraught with dangers, toils, and snares. This is true given the social and political realities of our world we face each day. While we need not be paranoid, we do need to be self-aware and careful so that biblical correctness will win over social or political allegiances.

My prayer for us and all churches is that we would lead the way in showing what common decency looks like and what it means to truly follow Jesus in treating of all people fairly and respectfully.

It can be overwhelming to conceive how this might happen on the level of the fragmented global body of Christ. But we can begin in our local churches and communities that we serve. We can do this by loving one another as the truest of neighbors with the love of Jesus and the respect deserved by an image bearer of God.

I am not asking you to sacrifice important doctrinal distinctive or to ignore or condoning sin. I am urging you to keep ourselves untied in the Holy Spirit which binds us together with peace.

Please notice that it is the Holy Spirit that unities us. As believers in Jesus, we are not called to create unity, but we are called to maintain it! Or in the very least, not to disrupt it! And as we await the time when we will be with Christ, we will need to humbly work through many issues which we do not perfectly understand. Our thinking is to be guided by the wisdom of the Bible and the Holy Spirit who dwells within us so that our church communities on earth may reflect the unity that one day will be completed when we share the oneness of God with his people forever together in unbroken harmony.

In the hymn 'Blest Be the Tie That Binds, it says – 'Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.'

As we endeavor diligently to maintain the unity found in the Holy Spirit, may we be of like mindedness. May that unity be our polar star! I am confident that Christ's presence and guidance can lead us to experience a deep love and purpose as Jesus helps us engage our conflicts and differences with Jesus' unifying wisdom and grace.

So, on Feb. 12st we will be asking you to put your money where your spirit lies. On that Sunday we will be asking you to make a pledge to our shared ministry so that we may better serve Jesus Christ. Today in your bulletin and it was sent out electronically to you with our worship bulletin, is a letter concerning our 2023 Stewardship Campaign entitled 'Grow One Step or Two' which is asking each of you to increase your stewardship to the church by 10% or 20%.

For our virtual viewers, you can request that we send you self-addressed pre-paid envelopes for your offering. We are hoping that soon everyone will be able to donate to our church electronically.

Let us use this campaign to build our shared ministry here at our church.

Let us pray:

O God, help us to celebrate, cherish, and seek to experience a deeper unity with people of a like mind so we all can enjoy Jesus. May we be united in our hearts and minds so that the story of Jesus reaches the far corners of our world. Help us to become a better reflection of You in our community. AMEN.