

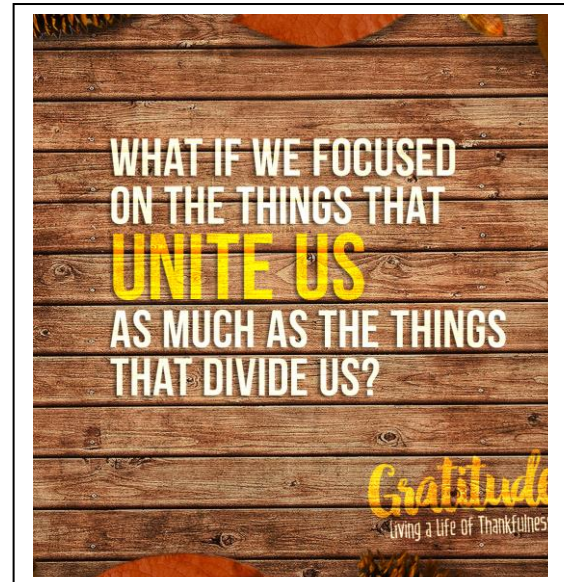
What Unites Us

Sunday 16th Jan.

Scripture: Acts 2:44–47 and

Romans 3:20–24

Well we have certainly seen where people sit in relation to the



tennis. Some comment on social media to deport Djovic and may get “likes”. Some comment on social media to allow him to play and may also get “likes.”

Our sermon is about unity. So what is the opposite to that – divide or divisiveness. Division is nothing new – it is an ongoing issue – politics, religion, gender issues, social status – you name it, we feel the division; we hear it; we see it; we read about it, and yet, most of us think, “*Not me.*” Until we take a closer look and ask ourselves, “*Do I have friends who think differently than me?*”

Differences in opinion and beliefs are not uncommon but somewhat expected. If we have our beliefs but are able to accept other’s views then that adds to our conversations.

However, when we stick to our beliefs and views like super glue, and choose only those friends who believe and think that same as us then we conclude that we only choose friends with the same stripes as us.

When we listen to podcasts, watch news shows, read newspapers, choose social media follows, and read articles that not only support our beliefs but affirm our "rightness" in our beliefs, we should not be surprised by the outcome.

By feeding our ideologies with like-mindedness, we have starved out a significant part of human connectedness – an unbiased relationship with all of God's people. Inevitably, our added "rightness vs. wrongness" mindset has driven a wide wedge through God's crown of creation, leaving a deep ravine for divisiveness to dwell. But what if we focused on the things that unite us as much as the things that divide us?

Take a look at social media and you will see division. In a fit of hurt, anger, or frustration, we need to check our loving hearts, God-given conscience, and spirit of grace before we get behind a

screen. Impassioned, we pound away on our keyboard, blasting our opinion and stating what is "right." All the while, knowing our words cause pain, emotionally cutting and tearing down our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. I may not say it to your face at church, but I will inadvertently blast you through social media.

For those who use social media consistently – do you ever get question when you seem to get dislikes and not likes. What is going on? Of course, when you receive lots of likes, you become justified in your post, creating a false sense of righteousness. You do not need to apologize, show kindness, patience, or self-control. Forget considering others before yourself or extending grace. You feel justified because you have "likes."

"Minor" behaviours such as these drive the wedge of division in the body of Christ and encourage other believers to do the same. As others in the body respond to and encourage these disgraceful outbursts, the body of Christ disintegrates under its divisiveness.

Disagreement left unchecked leads to a poisonous spirit. Where a spirit of grumbling dwells within the church, there is no spirit of gratitude but a spirit of divisiveness. And while the backbiting and argumentativeness continue, the Evil One delights as we battle believers under the banner of "rightness."

So how did the early church manage to continue to be unified?

They were not of the same "stripe." They came from all walks of life and consisted mostly of societal outcasts, the uneducated, the poorest of the poor, sick, and despised. Yet they worked together and continued to follow Jesus, even after His resurrection.

However, to much of their dismay, their following did not lead to birthing a new political consortium and revolution. Instead, a faith community arose – the early church.

Celsus (a second-century Greek philosopher and early opponent of Christianity) said Christians were "an ignorant folk." Although spoken unkindly, he wasn't entirely wrong. Most Christians were the opposite of the societal elite and educated. Paul (who was highly educated and from a higher social class) said the Christians in Corinth were ignorant, powerless, and of obscure birth.

For the first three centuries, the Christian majority was a mixed bag that mostly belonged to society's lower echelons. Scholars were the exception, creating a vast chasm between the rich and poor, the educated and uneducated. Believers of various ethnicities – Jewish, Gentile, Greek, Asian – added to this mixture. The early church found itself striving to unify amongst its hefty differences.

A common misconception about the 1st Christians, who were Jews, was that they rejected the Jewish religion. But they saw Jesus' message and resurrection as the fulfillment of everything they knew and believed from the Old Testament. They still worshipped in the Temple and synagogues.

However, when friction developed with the Jewish people who rejected Jesus as the Messiah, these 1st century Christians had to meet secretly and were eventually ex-communicated from their synagogue.

Thus they suffered under intense persecution. Early Christians were the religious minority and despised by the unbelieving

political and religious majority. They were laughed at, mocked, spat on, falsely accused of sexual crimes, and physically forced to submit to a totalitarian government. Life was hard. If given permission, the heavy stressors of the day could consume the most robust believer and rob him of every ounce of joy.

However, the early church was far from a joyless bunch. They did not allow negativity dwell within them. Unifying the body of Christ was a top priority of its leaders as they sought a faith practice that would surpass the congregational differences. The unifier was the *Eucharist* – the taking of communion – grounded in gratitude.

In the early church, the Sabbath (like our Sunday) was the first day of the week. The sole purpose for gathering was to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus through communion, the Eucharist. It was a service of remembrance and gratitude for God's grace. Every Sabbath was a communion service. The Eucharist was the DNA of the early church worship.

Until the Protestant Reformation (the sixteenth century), Christian worship centered around communion, its highest worship act. Their gatherings were happy occasions – eating together with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people in mind.

Every Sunday was an Easter celebration, which began the Eucharist by giving thanks. Before taking communion, believers would offer gratitude to God, recounting at length His acts and testifying to the power of His Holy Spirit. Then they shared after taking communion in a second round of gratitude prayers. And after these prayers, they would gather together to care for one another by taking up an offering and sharing of their resources.

What was it that unified the believers in practice, spirit and mind – *Gratitude?*

As humans living as the body of Christ, we all can cause pain and trouble to others – either intentionally or unintentionally.

Different passions and convictions fuel much of our trouble within the church.

Do phrases such as these, "*This is how I see it,*" or "*That is not what I think,*" and "*If you could only see things my way,*" sound familiar?

There are many times, when good people with deeply-felt passions within the church bump heads causing things to go awry very quickly. The early church understood that focusing on God's grace in our life through gratitude is a strong unifier that places us all on a level playing field.

Why gratitude?

Because it reminds us of all that God has done for us – things we do not deserve. There are 2 functions of God's law. Firstly, His law shows us where we are going wrong and secondly, the moral code guides our actions by holding up God's moral standards.

We do not earn salvation by keeping the law, but we do please God when our life conforms to His revealed will for us. There is no discrimination when it comes to sin. There is no "little" sin – all sins make us sinners and cuts us off from God and lead to death.

But God declares us righteous through Christ's sacrifice and resurrection.

Think of it this way – when a judge in a court of law declares the defendant “not guilty” the charges are removed from their record. When God forgives our sins, our record is wiped clean.

We need to learn from the early church, and this is why we have God's inspired word – so we can see how it was done and embrace it ourselves. We need to keep out any division and replace it with a spirit of grace. Paul and the early church fathers preached this – a gospel of grace. They knew if we would slow down, choose gratitude, and thank God for one another, we would live like Christ. Ultimately, they knew this was the way to make a difference in the world.

So, what if we *expressed* gratitude for one another?

What if we said words of thanks, wrote words of thanks, and prayed words of thanks? If we make gratitude a habit, our hearts will soften to one another. And eventually, what we have in common will outweigh our differences.

The Psalmist understood the power of gratitude, which is why he told us entrance into the gates of the Lord was through words of thanksgiving and songs of praise.