

**Working Together** Jan 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017

### **1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Romans 12:3-8**

*Once there was man who was lost while driving through the country. It was before the days GPS, so he tried to read a map while driving, not a good idea, and of course he accidentally drove off the road into a deep muddy ditch. Though not injured, his car was stuck. He could see a building in the distance that looked like a farm, so, the man walked to the nearby farm for help.*

*When he got there, he met an old farmer and he asked him for help. The farmer replied, "Warwick can get you out of that ditch," and he pointed to an old mule standing in a field. The man looked at the old run-down mule and then looked at the farmer who just stood there repeating, "Yep, old Warwick can do the job." The man had his doubts, but he figured he had nothing to lose. So, the two men and Warwick made their way back to the ditch. The farmer hitched the mule to the car. With a snap of the reigns he shouted, "Pull, Fred! Pull, Jack! Pull, Ted! Pull, Warwick! Pull, Fred! Pull, Jack! Pull, Ted! Pull, Warwick!" And sure enough, the mule pulled the car from the ditch with very little effort.*

*The man was amazed. He thanked the farmer, patted the mule, and then he curiously asked, "Tell me, why did you call out all those other names, before you called Warwick to pull?"*

*The farmer grinned and said, "Old Warwick here is pretty much blind. He can't see a thing. But, so long as he believes that he's part of a team, then he's willing to do his part and pull as hard as he can."*

The story is a good metaphor for teamwork. If anyone here has ever been part of a team, not just a sports team, but a group of people working together for a common goal, then you know how important it is to pull together, to have a shared vision, and to support each other. And when you work together as a team, then everyone on the team can feel stronger.

But when there is division, and disagreements, and arguments, and one is pulling in one direction, and one in another – well then, you just don't get anywhere.

The church in Corinth was divided. And in the opening of Paul's letter to them, he appeals to them for unity.

*"I appeal to you, brother, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no more divisions among you, and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought." (1Cor.1:10)*

Paul had received word from “Chloe’s people” that there was quarrelling among the church at Corinth. It’s not clear exactly what they were arguing about, but we do know that they were certainly taking sides against each other; aligning themselves to clear leaders.

Some of followed the ministry of Apollos: we read later in Corinthians how Apollos was thought to have great intellectual ability, rhetorical eloquence, and a great knowledge of the scriptures. A good choice for a leader perhaps.

Some followed the leadership of the first apostle – Cephas, who we know more as the apostle Peter, who would preach on the Holy Spirit.

And later in Corinthians, we hear how some followed Paul because he was their founding missionary.

Still others, chose the person Christ to be their guiding leader, not Christ’s teachings, but Christ the human. And since he had physically left them, they were waiting for the promises that he would come back and be with them and instruct them in the ways of truth.

Well, as admirable as any of these leaders might be, the result was that the church was divided and that the unity that they all shared in Christ the Messiah, was being dissolved in favor of human loyalties. What should have been holding them together – their common life in Christ – was evaporating before their very eyes. It was as if their divisions, their arguing, their disagreements, were literally dividing Christ. In verse 13 Paul asks them:

*Is Christ divided?*

It’s a good question that we can ask ourselves today. Is Christ divided?

The church today is in the throes of theological turmoil. You might know some of the issues: sexuality, biblical authority, social justice versus personal salvation, the gender pronoun of the name God. These are all big issues, and they reflect the society in which we live. Each of us here may have our own opinion on any one of these present-day issues. And we may not all agree, but, we are still called into unity with Christ.

This week the world churches are entering into a week of prayer for Christian Unity across all denominations; unity regardless of their theological viewpoints on any of these big issues.

But let's not confuse unity with uniformity. It is OK to have different opinions. It is OK to challenge and question each other on those opinions. That is why we meet in study groups like Mustard Seeds. We might not all agree, but the true test of Christian unity is the ability to disagree without compromising our ultimate loyalty to Christ. Christian unity is the ability to disagree with respect for each other. Christian unity is the ability to disagree without arguing.

We often refer to each other in the church as our 'church family.' And we all know that families do argue with each other. Sometimes those arguments might be quiet, passive, even sulky. Sometimes family arguments might be loud, shouting matches. Many years ago, I spent some time living in Italy, and you would think they were about to kill each other when they argued with loud voices and arm waving. We are all different. But imagine if you heard this message on a friend's answering machine:

*"Hello. We're in the middle of a family fight right now. Leave your name and number at the beep and whoever wins will call you right back."*

You see, it's not about winning when we disagree – it is not about having to be right. It is about working together. Working together with a united focus on Christ. You've all heard the phrase "we have to agree to disagree". Well that's OK! As a community of believers, when we come together with that unity – it can transcend our diversity. It can help us overcome all our differences, so that then we can work as a team, and then we can celebrate each other.

In our scripture in Romans, Paul reminds us that we are all different, and that we each have different roles to play. In verse 6 Paul tells the church at Rome, and us:

*We have different gifts according to the grace given us. (Romans 12:6)*

Imagine if everyone gathered here was a farmer – then who would teach our children? If everyone here had wonderful voices and wanted to sing in the choir – well Mike and Merry might be pleased, but who would sit in the pews? If everyone was skilled in decorating the church – well then the church would look beautiful, but who would help clean the church? No – we are all given different skills, abilities, strengths, different jobs to do. As Paul writes in verse 4:

*...not all have the same function (Romans 12:4)*

And that is so true of our church today. We don't have the same 'function', strength, abilities – just look at our puzzle – some clear snow, some can work on the boiler, some sing, play music, or their strength is friendship and reaching out to others. We are all different, but we need each other to make our church work. And it is essential to remember that not one of us is any less important than the other. Not one job is any less important. We must work together, with respect and unity.

As a community of faith, we are called to emphasize what we already have in common – a belief in Christ. Because when we are not united, when we are seen to be squabbling and disagreeing - how can we reach out to others? Why would anyone want to enter any family that is arguing and divided?

So, let us put behind us any disagreements. Let us not allow any differences to threaten our unity. Let us remember that our true unity is not found in the personality of our leaders; unity is not found in the philosophy of our congregation; unity is not found in our denominational label. Our true unity comes **only** from the Christ. It is Christ that is the tie that binds us to work together.