

Together, Not the Same
Matthew 10:1-4, John 17:20-23, 1 Corinthians 1:10
First Presbyterian Church
April 29, 2018
Rethinking Church in the 21st Century

We're now in the middle of a series of sermons
that seek to drill down into some of the primary takeaways
from our congregational retreat last month.
Last week we were reminded how
the members of the 21st century church
will need to faithfully and thoughtfully
tell the story of their journey of faith.
This morning's sermon, "Together, Not the Same,"
describes both what the 21st century church is –
it is a community bound together not by sameness
but by love...
and "together, not the same" also describes
what may be our most vivid.... most effective....
and MOST NEEDED witness to Jesus Christ
in a culture that is increasingly divided and polarized.

In Romans 12, Paul writes:

"Do not be conformed to this world..."

Followers of Jesus in the 21st century
must not be conformed to the divisiveness and polarization
that is endemic in our culture right now.

In the power of Christ's Spirit
we can and we must embody a new way of being together
while not the same.

Bible Readings
Matthew 10:1-4

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. ²These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

John 17:20-23

²⁰"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

1 Corinthians 1:10

¹⁰Now 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.

Sermon

I have a serious concern to bring up with you, my friends.

I'll put it as urgently as I can:

You must get along with each other.

You must learn to be considerate of one another,
cultivating a life in common.

You who are in favor of putting our playground in the front yard
and you who oppose it.

You who worship in this sanctuary with its tradition and formality
and you who experience the holy in Kairos worship.

You who favor opening our church for same-sex marriages
and you who are vehemently against it.

You who get your information from Fox News
and you who watch MSNBC.

You who voted for Donald Trump
and you who did not.

You who believe climate change is real
and you who think it's a hoax.

You who favor a more open border
and you who want to build a wall.

You who support the NRA
and you who don't.

You who think racism has been dealt with in our country
and you who know racism is still very much a reality.

I have a serious concern to bring up with you, my friends.

I'll put it as urgently as I can:

You must get along with each other.

You must learn to be considerate of one another,
cultivating a life in common.

This is not just my concern, of course.

If it was I would be the worst kind of preacher –
using this pulpit to harp on my own pet peeves...
abusing your time and attention
to advance my own agenda.

No, this is not just my concern... it is scripture.

In fact, it is Eugene Peterson's translation of the tenth verse
of the first chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

Paul spends the first nine verses
doing the bread-and-butter stuff
you see in all of his letters.

“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus” etc..

“To the church of God that is in Corinth,
to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus,
called to be saints,” check.

“I give thanks to my God always for you
because of the grace of God
that has been given you in Christ Jesus.”
Yada, yada, yada.

It’s the introductory stuff... it’s the formalities.

Until verse 10...

when Paul leads off... rather sternly, I think...
with the most important thing on his mind.

“I have a serious concern to bring up with you, my friends.
I’ll put it as urgently as I can:
You must get along with each other.
You must learn to be considerate of one another,
cultivating a life in common.”

At the time he is writing this letter,
the church is probably not more than five years old.

Paul organized it... got it on its feet...
and then, as evangelists are wont to do,
he moved on.

But he didn’t forget about it.

Some of you may have been involved in forming a new church –
it can be very exciting!

You get a building up... find some used hymnals...
a woodworker in the congregation
fashions a pulpit and table and font...
a volunteer types up the bulletin each week...
and before long you look around
and there’s a couple of hundred people in worship.

But then the founding pastor moves on
to do it all over again.

She moves on... but she doesn’t forget.

A new pastor comes in and does some things differently
and she hears about it.

If things really start to implode,
she hears about it even more.

The high-church people are standing guard at the pipe organ
and the new folks are all flocking
to hear the praise band in the gymnasium.

The Earthcare task force
wants to plow a community garden in the front yard
which sends the Property Committee into a tizzy.

A wealthy member dies, leaving the church a nice gift.

The Mission Committee sees a Habitat house,
the Finance Committee sees a rainy-day fund.

Well, that's sort of what happened in Corinth –
some of those Corinthians have claimed the sanctuary
and some are holed up in the Fellowship Hall.
Some are down in the youth room...
and of course, as always, there are a few in the parlor
just to make sure nobody's putting their feet on the furniture.
And just keep in mind,
there are not that many to begin with.
Generous estimates are that this church is 250 or 300 people...
but more recently scholars suggest
it's no more than 50 or 60.
That's a lot of factions for 50 or 60 people...
a lot of pathology for such a small church.
But it can happen.
We who have some history here in this church
know it can happen.¹

Heather and I have talked about this before...
and we did again on the retreat –
how social research reveals
that we are sorting ourselves into ever more likeminded enclaves... that we are hunkering
down in our various little camps –
warming ourselves by the fires of our own arguments
and knowing that whatever fire we're warming ourselves by,
we're right!
Even if we're non-aligned,
we believe we're right to be non-aligned.

Chris Henry, our retreat leader, had a name for this.
He called it *fractured polarity*.
“We can see it in our politics,
our cultural discourse,
our religious institutions,
and in our cities and local neighborhoods.
That which divides us
seems to be greater than what unites us,
and what were once just differences of opinion
have increasingly become reasons
for ending friendships
or discontinuing communication.
Ours is a culture that seems to be fracturing on many different levels...

¹ Theodore J. Wardlaw in “A Good Word for Foolishness,” a sermon preached at the Winter Meeting of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, February 23, 2002.

with Americans increasingly self-segregating
into enclaves of those who are most like us.”²

Well, to be sure, this “sorting” FEELS more comfortable...
it does feel good to be with people who are like us.
Yet I would suggest to you it is not what Jesus intends.
You may have thought it odd
to include among our Bible readings today
Matthew’s listing of the twelve disciples.
Usually we just sort of read through the names quickly
so we can get to the real stuff that comes after.
But in this case that would be a mistake
because of the backstory of two of these men.
You may have noticed
that Matthew identifies several of the disciples
using family terms –
as “son of” so-and-so or “brother.”
That’s pretty typical of the time.
But to three of the disciples he gives other identifying labels –
Matthew, Simon, and Judas.
Judas, of course, we know him –
he’s remembered as “the one who betrayed Jesus.”
But Matthew and Simon
present a very interesting combination.
Matthew is named as a “tax collector”
and Simon is specified as “the Cananaean.”
And what this means is that among the twelve...
within the little community gathered around Jesus...
in this tiny church before there was a church...
there is a former Roman hireling, Matthew,
living side-by-side with an anti-Roman revolutionary, Simon...
a former Roman lackey Matthew
with a former Rome-hater, Simon...
together... in Jesus’ little group...
showing that the new community of Jesus
was at least trying to embrace and transcend
the tensions in the old community of Israel.³
Now the sheer power of that “visual”...
of what we would today call
the “optics” of Matthew and Simon
living and working and worshiping together
is hard for us to even imagine.
Yet, this is what Jesus earnestly prayed for:
“that they may become completely one,

² Rev. Chris Henry in his Saturday morning keynote at the March 2018 congregational retreat.

³ John Meier in his commentary on Matthew (p. 105) as quoted by Thomas G. Long in his commentary, p.114-115.

so that the world may know that you have sent me..."
This is what the Apostle Paul was getting at when he wrote:
"I have a serious concern to bring up with you, my friends.
I'll put it as urgently as I can:
You must get along with each other..."

Remember, this was a time in Christian history
when one could not become a Christian
unless one actually knew of a Christian.⁴

There were no books or tracts...
no billboards or televangelists or radio broadcasts...
no websites or Christian movies.

The only evidence for the gospel
were the good works
and good lives
and good words
of the people who lived together
in the community of Jesus.

And in the 21st century,
we are in many ways returning to that time.
As hard as it is to wrap our minds around this...
(especially here in the South)
there are many, many people in America
who not only do not know about Jesus,
but will never know about Jesus
unless they actually know a follower of Jesus...
unless they actually see and experience
the community built by his love.

So, they will never know
that God so loves them that God sent his only Son...
never know that their sins are forgiven...
never know that there are treasures in heaven
that are far more precious than the treasures of earth...
never know that he is with them always, no matter what,
until the end of time.

They will never know these truths
unless they know YOU... unless they know US.

You may be the only Bible some people read.

This church may be the only Bible some people read.

Most folks never read the first four Gospels –

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

But you know what they DO READ?

They read YOU... they read me... they read us together.

⁴ Brian McLaren in "A Radical Rethinking of our Evangelistic Strategy," a paper published by the Fuller Youth Institute (fulleryouthinstitute.org).

Which means that we are like a Fifth Gospel...
who is being read to see how well we love each other
and how well we love the people Jesus loved.⁵

How the church lives together...
how THIS church lives together is of crucial importance.
When the people of Hickory look at First. Pres. –
when they look at US –
they should not simply see
another social club trying to raise money
and keep its membership up.

No, as Tom Long writes:
They should see the living embodiment of the kingdom of heaven...
They should see a community of faith
where leaders humbly serve rather than swagger...
where the weak are nourished instead of cast aside...
where people who lose their way
are not forgotten but sought out and welcomed in... where its members
(where WE)
cultivate mercy and forgiveness
as if they were the rare flowers of heaven.⁶

May it be so, Lord. May it be so.

⁵ This comes from the title of a book by Bobby Conway, "The Fifth Gospel: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John... YOU.

⁶ Long, p. 202-203