



I BELONG TO A UNITED COMMUNITY

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer

Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN

October 8-9, 2011

No. 4: The Value of Community
Scripture: John 17:20-21

The greatest thing that can ever happen to a human being is to come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. When that magnificent moment takes place Jesus adopts us into his family. He brings us into a community with himself and his people. This new community is called the church.

For several weeks we have been looking at how this community operates and what it means to say we belong to it. We are wearing buttons that announce, "I BELONG . . . SO CAN YOU."

We have photos on the stage of some of the lovely people who make up our marvelous community here at Autumn Ridge.

We are emphasizing the value of community because it is in community that we grow in grace.

It is in community we use our gifts.

It is in community that we are comforted when we are sad and corrected when we are bad.

Today our subject is **I BELONG TO A UNITED COMMUNITY.**

We are going to ask three questions about our unity. There is an outline in your RidgeLines if you would like to follow along.

The first question is, **WHY IS UNITY IMPORTANT?**

We know it is important because just before Jesus went to the cross he talked to his Father.

Of all the things Jesus might have prayed for he asked that his disciples will be united.

We can hear the passion in his voice as Christ calls out, "**Holy Father, protect them in the power of your name . . . so they may be one as we are one.**" (John 17:11)

Then he looks down the years and he thinks of us and adds, **"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you."** (John 17:20-21)

Now why is our unity so important to Jesus?

He tells us in the next verse when he prays, **"May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."**

May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them, even as you have loved me." (John 17:21, 23)

Do you see why our unity is so significant?

It is not just because it is nice to agree and it cuts down on the squabbling. No there is a far greater purpose.

When Christians are united it provides a compelling reason for people to believe in Christ.

It demonstrates that Jesus was sent by the Father to be the Savior of the world. It is proof of the love of God.

Now it is clear that Jesus is not talking about some abstract spiritual union that unites believers everywhere.

That does exist and it is glorious, but it is not what Jesus is referring to here. He is describing a unity that fills a local church.

So instead of fights there is forgiveness.

Instead of resentment there is reconciliation.

Instead of competition there is cooperation.

Instead of gossip there is grace.

That unity beckons people to believe in Jesus as the Son of God.

So unity is not just desirable, it is essential.

Without it the world has no reason to believe that Jesus Christ can make any difference to their life.

For people are repulsed by disunity.

That is why Jesus is asking his Father, "Don't let my disciples blow it. May they rise to the challenge so the world may know that you sent me and have loved them even as you love me."

SECOND QUESTION, **WHAT DOES UNITY LOOK LIKE?**

The best answer is that unity looks like the relationship that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit enjoy in heaven. The only problem is we can't see that and so we need more down to earth examples.

So let's start with three expressions of unity found in the New Testament.

The first is **Upward in Worship.**

Paul writes, **"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 15:5-6)**

In this service we have been glorifying God with our hearts and with our mouth and that is a spectacular way to show that we are all one in Christ Jesus.

A second expression of unity is **Outward in Witness.**

We go back to where Jesus prays that we may be united so that, **"The world may believe that you have sent me." (v 21)** A united church is a missionary church.

A united church is a sending church.

A united church shares God's passion for a lost world.

A divided church is a callous church.

But a united church feels great compassion for those starving in the famine in East Africa.

For those suffering because of war and for those imprisoned because of their faith.

A third expression of unity is **Inward in Fellowship.**

Earlier in the service we read that magnificent Psalm that begins, **"How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity." (Psalm 133:1)**

God calls us to unity because it is "good and pleasant."

No one ever called disunity and discord good and pleasant. It is stressful and upsetting.

Here is a description of what it means to say "I belong to a united community."

"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." (Colossians 3:13-14)

That is what we are to strive for.

But if we are to appreciate what unity looks like it is important we also understand **what unity doesn't look like.**

Unity is not uniformity.

It doesn't mean we all think and act the same way.

We have a God of tremendous variety who has made us all different.

He has created 800,000 species of insects, 250,000 species of flowers, 500 varieties of dogs.

He certainly doesn't want to have one type of Christian.

But because we find it hard to give each other freedom in our unity we Christians have a tendency to want to insist that we all fit the same mould.

This is a great shame.

At Autumn Ridge we rejoice that although we are united in Christ we are a varied community.

We can't even agree on which football teams to support. Some of us like the Vikings and other the Packers.

We vote for different political parties.

We educate our children differently.

Some of us send our children to public schools, others to private schools, and some of us home school our children.

Then they go off to college and some of us who sent our children to public schools now send them to private colleges and vice versa.

As a church we take no position on these issues except to say that we encourage people to vote and be part of the political process and we support whatever educational decisions parents make for their children believing parents know best.

In the area of doctrine we take our stand on the Bible. There are some issues that we are flexible on and there are others that we aren't.

There are some things that are negotiable and others that are not. Another way of putting this is to say that certain things we hold in an open hand and others in a closed hand.

Let me give you some examples.

We believe that Jesus Christ is coming again to this earth. That is nonnegotiable. That is held in the closed hand.

But how he is going to come and when he is going to come we put in the open hand. We don't know and we are not going to be dogmatic on that.

Here is another example.

We believe the Bible is the word of God and so it is trustworthy and divinely inspired.

We want all of our congregation to read it.

That is nonnegotiable.

It is held in the closed hand.

However, we don't mind which version you use.

You can use The King James, The Message, The New International Version or the Jerusalem Bible.

Use any one you like. That is the open hand.

So part of the challenge of us living in unity is to understand those things which are essential and those that aren't, for we are called to love the person who supports a different team and listens to different music and votes for a different party.

The reason we are called to love them is that if they are a follower of Jesus Christ they are our brothers and sisters. We are going to spend all of eternity with them so we better start getting along now.

And then **unity doesn't mean we won't have problems.**

The unity of the church in Jerusalem after Pentecost was profound. Luke tells us, **"That all the believers were one in heart and mind." (Acts 4:32)**

But that didn't mean there weren't problems. There was a major row over the distribution of food to the widows. But the Apostles faced up to it and found a solution. Imagine what would have happened to the unity of the Jerusalem church if the Apostles had neglected those widows. It would have resulted in the first church split.

Then **unity doesn't mean we won't have disagreements.**

That may surprise you because Paul says, **"I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought." (1 Corinthians 1:10)**

At first sight Paul seems to be suggesting we must have total agreement.

But he can't mean that we are to agree on everything.

First because it is impractical.

Second because Paul himself engaged in disagreements and third because disagreements can be very healthy in the church if they are handled properly. Disagreements can result in a clearer understanding of God's purpose for his people.

In the early days of the church there was a great disagreement about what to do with Gentile converts. Some people thought these new converts should keep Jewish laws and the men should be circumcised.

So they held a council in Jerusalem to discuss the matter.

They eventually decided, in the spirit of unity, that the Gentiles didn't need to be circumcised and that was a break through in the outreach of the church into the Gentile world. My suspicion is that without it the church today would be a lot smaller.

There will be issues that arise on which we disagree.

Let's not be afraid of them. Let's sit down calmly and talk them out. This is how we mature. We are not afraid of fresh ideas for our God is always doing a new thing.

So what did Paul mean when he said, "All of you agree with one another?" He meant that a church has to agree that unity is a priority and so that when we face disagreements our goal is to come to a consensus, rather than leave and storm off in a huff.

How do we achieve that?

My father gave me some marvelous advice when I was ordained. He said, "John, as you go into ministry, learn to compromise."

I was appalled. I said, "But I didn't think we were supposed to compromise as Christians."

He said, "Oh we don't compromise on the great truths of our faith but there will be very few times as a pastor when anyone asks you to deny the deity of Christ. Most of the issues in the church are not life and death.

There is room for different ideas.

People get into difficulties when they insist on their own way, which is not necessarily God's way or the biblical way. It is just the way they see things. And that causes untold grief."

I have never forgotten his counsel to compromise, to try and see the other person's point of view.

Maybe they have a better idea than I have and the church will be more effective for God if I am willing to change my position.

Compromise had become a dirty word in Washington.

But in any society it is essential that we learn to practice this very important and very difficult skill.

Sometimes we cannot agree as Christians but we can agree to disagree. That is what Paul is requesting in Romans chapter 14. There he talks about one believer who will eat anything while another chap is a vegetarian.

So here are two believers. One is a paid up member of PETA. He is not going to eat any creatures that God has made. His best friend is also a Bible believing Christian and he thinks that PETA stands for **P**eople **E**ating **T**asty **A**nimals.

The Apostle says, "Don't condemn each because God has accepted you both." He adds, **"One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." (Romans 14:5)**

In other words we can have unity without unanimity.

That is what we do at our church meetings and Elder Board meetings. We do not require a vote of 100 percent to go forward. There may be 90 percent in favor and 10 against. Those in the minority have expressed their opinion. They agree to abide by the decision and the majority knowing that next time the situation might be

reversed. We recognize that our oneness in Christ is more important than how may view lesser matters.

SO WE COME TO OUR FINAL QUESTION, **HOW CAN WE ENJOY UNITY?**

Unity is clearly desirable but it is obviously difficult to attain. There is a very good reason for this.

Satan knows that the unity of Christians demonstrates that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. So the devil does everything in his power to make sure Christians are not united and he has been remarkably successful.

How successful can be seen in a parody that was written of the hymn *Onward Christians Soldiers*.

One of the verses of the original hymn goes:

**"Like a mighty army moves the church of God
Brothers we are treading where the saints have trod.
We are not divided, All one body we
One in hope, in doctrine, one in charity."**

The parody goes like this,

**"Like a mighty turtle moves the church of God
Brothers we are treading
Where we've always trod.
We are all divided, Many bodies we
Few in hope and doctrine, none in charity."**

Sadly there is a lot of truth in that ditty.

I read somewhere there are 100,000 different denominations around the world.

That does not suggest that the church of Jesus is united.

So how can we enjoy unity?

First, we must go to **the source of unity**.

This is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul writes, **"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."** (Galatians 3:28)

That is an amazing statement.

In the first century world there were three huge divisions in society. The first was racial, the second was economic and the third was gender. Yet Paul is able to say that in Jesus Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. We are all one in him.

The distinctions still exist but they are irrelevant compared to who we are in Christ.

If we want to be unified in our marriage, we need to go to the source, Jesus Christ.

If we want to be unified in our family, we must go to the source Jesus Christ.

If we want to be unified in our church let's go to the source, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, if we want to enjoy unity we must turn to **the sustainer of unity.**

This is the Holy Spirit.

Paul writes, **"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."**
(Ephesians 4:3)

It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit that keeps us united. Interestingly it is the same Holy Spirits who makes us different by giving us various gifts.

But when we use these gifts under his direction we will be held together by the ropes of peace.

Last week I had the great honor of dedicating a Dragon Boat for the wonderful folk at Join the Journey. This is an advocacy and support group for women with breast cancer. A dragon boat is a long thin boat that seats about 20 ladies. It is not very stable so I inquired how they ensure the boat doesn't capsize and tip everybody into the water. They explained that the captain beats a drum and every paddler follows the cadence. When they do the boat moves smoothly forward and perhaps the race is won.



That is a good picture of the church. We are in the same ship. The Holy Spirit beats the cadence of disciples and when we obey all is well. If we try and go our own separate way then the fellow ship turns over.

Then if we want to enjoy unity we must engage in **the struggle for unity.**

Did you notice that Paul says, **"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit."** **(Ephesians 4:3)**

Unity does not come easily. It requires a lot of effort.

Unity is time consuming and costly.

It means sacrificing our preferences.

Unity is not an aim soon achieved.

It is a goal we will always be striving for.

One of the responsibilities of church leaders is to create an atmosphere of unity in the fellowship.

In the New Testament we find Paul instructing the leaders of the church at Philippi and Corinth to deal with those who are causing disunity because this nullifies the testimony of the church. He tells the Romans to stay away from those who cause division. He tells Titus to warn a divisive person twice then have nothing to do with them.

When you are concerned about a person who is creating disunity it is appropriate to bring the matter to one of our pastors or elders. However, this can sometimes be dealt with on a personal level first. If there is someone in your small group who is always causing arguments take them gently aside and talk about the importance of unity in the body.

Ask if you can pray for them.

Find out what is making them so feisty.

There may be a terrible pain in their life that is manifesting itself in a critical spirit towards others.

Share their burden and encourage them where you can.

Please pray for the unity of your church and understand that Satan wants to destroy it at all costs.

Let's seek to be agents of unity ourselves so that all of us can say "I belong to a united community."