

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Claiming Our Identity: A Unified Church”  
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1 Corinthians 1:10-25; Leviticus 19:33-34

The percentages are 26%, 64% and 92%; 26% in 1958, 64% in 2016, and according to another study, it has just now hit 92%. It is a trend that disturbs me but does not surprise me. It is one of the clearest demonstrations of our divided nation. I say that because these are the percentages of parents who do not want their children involved in an interparty marriage. What is an interparty marriage? It is a marriage where a person of one party, say a Democrat, marries someone from another party, say a Republican. What is fascinating about this is that people in this country overwhelmingly approve of every other type of inter-marriage. Just not this. As I said, this is one of the clearest demonstrations of how divided we are as a nation.

One might think that in this age of division, the one place that the nation could turn to for unity would be the church. After all, we are all Christians. But, as I can see your smiles and hear some low laughs, we all know that is not true either. Just as the nation has become divided, so too has the church, and it is getting worse. The Roman Catholic Church is facing a revolt against the papacy not known in modern times. The Orthodox Church is coming apart as the patriarch of the Russian Church will no longer meet with the Patriarch in Constantinople, over what is happening in Ukraine. The Southern Baptists had a major split a couple of decades ago and continue to disfellowship churches that ordain women. The bishops of the United Methodists will be meeting soon to see if there is any way to hold their denomination together; something many insiders believe is impossible. Since I was in high-school, there have been three new Presbyterian denominations formed out of our own. We are a church divided and not united. And unfortunately, this is not merely a denominational one. It is occurring on a congregational level as well. Members have abandoned their long-time congregations saying that their churches left them, long before they left the church. So, the question becomes, how, in the face of all this division, can we remain united? How can we as a church filled with Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, progressives and traditionalists hold together? The answer my friends can be found in this book, the Bible.

The answer to how we stay unified begins in the scriptures when we listen to the Torah. To clarify for a moment, the Torah is the first five books of the Old Testament. They are for Judaism, and were for Jesus, critical to understanding what it meant to be a follower of God. They contain not only the Laws, as we think of them, things like the Ten Commandments, but they also contain stories that give guidance to faithful living. One of the key understandings from the Torah were the two verses we read out of Leviticus, including, “*The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself...*” In other words, all are welcome, and all are loved and treated with respect. There are no boundaries that make some people greater or lesser than others. There are no boundaries that say, I am in and you are out. Notice it does not say that the alien or the stranger in the community must become like everyone else. Instead it says that once upon a time, the Israelites were strangers and knowing what it is like, they ought to welcome all into their midst. So where do we find our

unity? We find it in welcoming all, without any pre-conditions, without any prejudice. We are unified in that once upon a time we were all aliens, strangers to God, as Paul would later say. We are unified in our diversity and thus we become Everybody's Church.

The answer to how we stay unified continues when we listen to the Apostle Paul. Paul was no stranger to division, especially in the church in Corinth. This church was divided by class, slave versus free; by income, rich versus poor; by the manner of their spiritual gifts, those who spoke in tongues against everyone else; and by who baptized them, Paul, Apollos or Peter. And these divisions were not superficial. They were causing the church members to argue over who was more important and who had more power. They were tearing the church apart. It is into that situation that Paul immediately moves in his letter. He makes it clear that none of those things matter. That while they may be interesting, they are not important. The only thing that matters is Jesus. He writes that he proclaims Christ crucified and nothing more. That Christ is the power of God that changes lives and is transforming the world. Paul admits that that may seem foolish, after all how can a crucified Jew save the world? But for Paul, the unity of the church is found in this risen, reigning Christ. And this is the second place where we find our unity. We find it in Jesus. Jesus is the center of who we are and who we are becoming. Even when we may disagree about other things, we are united around being those who are committed to serving Christ.

The answer to how we stay unified is finally fleshed out when we listen to this entire story (the Bible). I say that because there are themes that are woven into this story that are intended to shape our lives both as individuals and as communities. And one of those great themes is that we are to be a community of blessing. I realize that blessing is a rather churchy word. A simple way to understand it is to see it as being a good neighbor. To be a good neighbor, in every sense of the word is to be a blessing. Last year Cindy and I went away on a trip and I forgot how much my lawn was going to grow. I was afraid on returning home that I would have a notice from the city about my long grass. But when we got back my lawn was mowed. I have no idea who did it. All I know is that I had a good neighbor. This is what it means to be a community of blessing; to reach out and do for others what they might not be able to do for themselves. To show kindness and compassion. To care when no one else will. Those all binds us together as we cultivate mission, inclusion and community. For each of those is a demonstration of being a community of blessing; blessing to those inside this place, and blessing to those in our community and in the world. So even as we disagree about other things, we are united around being those who cultivate, mission, inclusion and community.

What unifies us together is a Biblically based vision, that as Everybody's Church we commit ourselves to serving Christ by cultivating mission, inclusion and community. And by allowing this vision to unify us, we become a gift to one another. We are a gift because a church that only believes one way, can often be wrong and miss the balance that the other side gives. We are a gift to the world. We are a gift because we show the world that a church in which people do not always agree can be a unified church. You are a gift to me. You are a gift to me because you do not always agree with me, which means I am forced to think more deeply about what I believe and what I proclaim. This makes me a better person.

My challenge to you this morning then is this, to ask yourselves how am I helping this church become, more and more, Everybody's Church, which is committed to serve Christ by cultivating mission, inclusion and community?