

St. John's Lutheran Church  
January 27, 2008

"United in Jesus"  
1 Corinthians 1:10-18

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Many of you know that my family of origin was a divided family as far as church goes. My hometown was Luverne, Minnesota, and I grew up there through my sophomore year in high school when the family then moved to Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The members of my mother's family, the Wieses, were long-time residents of rural Luverne. And so it was that my Mom grew up on the Wiese farm outside of town. The Wieses were Presbyterian and were strong members of the United Presbyterian Church in Luverne. My Grandpa Wiese served as the janitor of the church.

My Dad's side of the family, the Hellands, were relative new-comers to Luverne. They had moved to Luverne when my Dad's dad, who was a Lutheran pastor, took a call as pastor to one of the Lutheran churches in Luverne. By the time Grandpa and Grandma Helland moved away from Luverne, to Grandpa Helland's next church, my Dad was in high school and had fallen in love with my Mom. So dad never moved on with Grandpa and Grandma and stayed in Luverne to marry my Mom. And my Presbyterian Mom joined my dad's Lutheran church, where Grandpa Helland had been pastor, and that was my home church growing up.

My mom's Presbyterian brother and sisters also lived in Luverne and one of her sisters fell in love with Uncle Bernard who was farming the Morgan farm outside of town. Uncle Bernard was a devout Catholic. And so Aunt Lorrie joined the Catholic Church and Uncle Bernard and Aunt Lorrie gave birth to all my favorite catholic cousins, Patty, Jimmy, Randy, Larry, Richie, Bobby Joe, and Michael. I spent many happy summer days in my youth helping out on the Morgan farm.

I started this autobiographical sketch by saying that many of you know that my family of origin was a divided family as far as church goes. In fact, that is over-stating the case. The fact is that my family of origin was a family that had differences within it as far as church goes. But those differences were not allowed to divide us. We knew about one another's differences. We respected one another's differences. And, I believe I grew up as a person who was open to expressions of Christian faith other than Lutheran because many of the people I loved the most in my family were Christians who were other than Lutheran.

I give credit to my Mom and Dad and the other elder members of my family for this happy state of affairs. And I find it to be a state of affairs with which the Bible would also be happy. One place in the Bible where differences among believers are addressed is in the second reading which is appointed to be read today from Paul's first letter to the Christians in the city of Corinth, the first chapter.

These verses begin with Paul making an appeal to his readers. And the appeal that Paul is making to his readers is an appeal for unity. Paul asks that the members of the church in the city of Corinth would all be in agreement. And Paul asks further that there would be no divisions among them.

Of course, Paul is asking for more than is possible from the Christians in Corinth. It is not possible that all the people in any church would all agree on every matter of faith and life. Jesus is quoted as having said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." He might also have said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there will there be differences of opinion among them!"

But as we read on in these words of Paul, we discover that Paul is not actually suggesting that people of faith could live together without disagreement. Rather, what Paul is requesting is that people of faith live together in such a way that their differences not become divisive. And the way that this can be accomplished, Paul suggests, is if people of faith can be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

What seems to have been going on in the church to which Paul is writing in the city of Corinth is that the church had divided itself up into groups. And it seems that these groups had aligned themselves with various strong leaders of the church – Paul, Apollos, Cephas - or Peter - and, of course, Christ himself. And, furthermore, it seems that these groups that were aligned with personalities were quarreling with one another. And it was the quarrelling that was unacceptable to Paul.

Paul calls for these groups to be united in the same mind and the same purpose. And how is this unity possible? Paul suggests that such unity is possible by focusing on the big picture. And the big picture for Paul includes the proclamation of the Gospel, the message about the cross of Jesus which is offered to humankind for the forgiveness of sin. If this purpose is before us all and if we have the same mind about the cross of Jesus, then it will be that our differences need not divide us.

For people of Christian faith, there are countless applications of this principle. It is, of course, within families that differences that have the power to divide are capable of having the most destructive effect. The last half of the decade of the 1980's I was in a situation as pastor where religious differences were laid before me in the community in which I lived and served. I came to know numerous persons in town who came from different Christian backgrounds who had now married each other. And some of these persons wanted to belong to the same church but did not want to disown the upbringing they had received.

On the one hand there were those persons who were members of strong extended family whose extended family did not easily accept the idea of disowning the religious upbringing the family had received. And on the other hand there were those persons who had religious upbringing which was different than their spouse, but who found some of those differences important to them and did not want to leave them behind.

And so it was that some such couples were not joining a church at all, some were attending the church where either the husband or the wife had joined or each was going to his or her own church with one of the spouses ending up going to the church where the children also belonged. However they were working it out, the situation was unsatisfactory to some of the people who found themselves in these circumstances. They felt that their religious differences were dividing their families more than they wanted to have division in their families.

So, one day a fellow asked me if it would be all right if he joined our Lutheran Church and stayed Catholic. "Would it be all right," he asked, "if I joined your church and considered myself a Catholic who currently belongs to a Lutheran Church - because I want to belong to the same church my wife and my boys belong to?" "I don't know," was my response. "Let me think about it."

So I did think about it. And I thought more than one thing. The big thing I thought was that it is unfortunate if differences in our Christian faith divide us more than those differences have to divide us. A second thing I thought was lots of times when people say they are Catholic or Presbyterian or Lutheran and I ask them what that means, their answer is that they don't know. They call themselves Catholic or Presbyterian or Lutheran just because that is what their families have told them they are and it is what they have always been know to be. But as far as knowing what, exactly, it is that sets a Catholic apart from a Lutheran or a Presbyterian, many people are hard pressed to say.

And another big thing I thought about at that time was that I knew that many people who belonged to my church and claimed to be Lutheran really weren't Lutheran. They weren't Lutheran because they thought like a Baptist. Or they thought like a Catholic. If these words have any classic, historic meaning at all, I thought, then I already have a congregation that is all mixed up, with Catholics and Lutherans and Baptists and Presbyterians all mixed together. In fact, I thought, many people are all mixed up inside themselves. Is anyone, I thought, purely Lutheran? Or purely anything?

Well, that was way more thinking than the fellow wanted to hear, so I didn't unload on him my whole thought process when we talked the next time. But I decided that it didn't matter what you called yourself or why you called yourself what you called yourself. The important thing for you was whether you had an idea that the ministry of the congregation that I was leading was a ministry that could feed your faith. It was my idea that my ministry was a classic, historic Lutheran ministry, but if you were fed by what you heard and experienced in my church, you were welcome to join no matter what you continued to call yourself. The only thing I asked was that people of different backgrounds take a class where we would have opportunity to reflect together on the different understandings and backgrounds and practice of Christian faith.

And so people did. People of many backgrounds began to join our congregation. And over the years we ended up with Catholic members and Baptist members and people who weren't sure what kind of Christian they were, just that they currently belonged to a Lutheran Church.

And another thing that happened is that members of our congregation who thought they were Lutheran were much more free to question as to whether they really were. They became much more free to acknowledge that there were things, perhaps that they knew their church had always taught or practiced but about which they had many questions.

But for everybody the big question was this: is this a congregation where your life in Christ is fed. If it was, then you were encouraged to affiliate with us and to consider yourself a member of the body of Christ that was our church.

This, in fact, is that same principle which St. John's Church has been embracing now for the better part of a decade. We have many people who have joined our congregation from different Christian backgrounds. They have joined through the Sunday evening Reflect opportunity where we have spent hours in discussion

about the various differences of Christian interpretation and practice. Some have found that they are more Lutheran than they thought they were. Some who thought they were Lutheran who have participated in Reflect have found out that perhaps they are not as Lutheran as they thought they were.

But all who have joined have joined because they believe that this is a place where their life in Christ is fed. And they believe that they are able to be of the same mind and of the same purpose as this congregation. And so we continue to find ourselves united in Christ. As the people of Christ. Reaching out to each other and to the world in his love. Amen.