

Sermon Draft

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Sermon: "United We Stand"

The power of a vision can transform people. We just celebrated Martin Luther King Day. Dr. King's "I have a dream" speech spoken on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, captivated the entire nation. He longed for the day when the color of a person's skin no longer mattered. We continue to be diligent in combating the sin of racism in fulfilling that vision. Powerful God-inspired visions can and do change people.

A passionate sense of mission and vision should motivate everyone within the church. Wonderful ministry can happen when everyone is working together, on the same goals, all for the glory of God. Unfortunately we know what can happen when people do not work together, or see eye to eye.

"United we stand, divided we fall," were words of a popular folk song in the 1960s. There is much truth in that song, united together we can accomplish great things, but divided we fail.

"It all started long before I came," said Pastor Kirk, pastor of the fictional Clyde's Corner Church. The founder of Clyde's Corner, Cedric Clyde, was a successful farmer at the turn of the twentieth century. To show his thanks to God, he paid for building the church. Just before he died, Cedric donated furniture to the church including, "a giant red horsehair couch whose rich color Cedric fancied would brighten the church." The horsehair couch was placed behind the pulpit. The huge chair featured massive curved arms with dark mahogany legs, each carved like the claw of a lion.

As the years passed, the church as well as the community changed, and that couch became the subject of a bitter dispute. Members of the Clyde family wanted to keep the couch where it was, while newer members thought the couch did not belong in the sanctuary. This debate sparked tension between the established members and the newer families who had moved to the country to get their children away from the drugs that were spreading into their suburban neighborhoods. The new families had bought up foreclosed farms and built beautiful homes in the hills. They were accustomed to fine furnishings, and they detested what they had dubbed, "the Victorian Leviathan" that dominated what otherwise was a plain church building.

However, the Clyde family viewed the couch in a different light. Their farms had fallen on hard times. They looked at the couch each Sunday and fondly remembered that their great-grandfather Cedric had founded the church. Although their tractors were rusting in the front yard, at least the pastor sat on Cedric's couch.

"Every sentence I put in the air," Pastor Kirk says of his sermons, "I see them all weighing whether it is ammunition for their side or the other side. Here I am preaching about the love of God, and everything I say is filtered through a single question: 'Is the pastor in favor of the red horsehair couch, or is the pastor against the couch?'" On the surface this issue seemed insignificant but it was tearing the church apart.

Our epistle lesson reveals some of the problems that the Corinthians were experiencing. The situation had reached the critical stage. People within the church were quarreling among themselves. What started as a simple disagreement now escalated into a full-scale conflict. Sides were taken. Harsh words were spoken. Some of the people might even have left the church. Given the current state of conflict the church was no longer attracting new people. Who would want to be drawn into a church conflict where they are immediately forced to take sides? When conflict rears its ugly head the mission and ministry of the church comes to a grinding halt. The final result is that nothing much gets accomplished.

In the midst of these very serious problems the apostle Paul was contacted. Paul was the founding pastor of the church. The people were confident that Paul would be able to advise them and help them work through the problems that threatened the future existence of the church. Through correspondence Paul was made aware of the situation. Paul's goal was to always build up the church and never tear it down. With a pastor's heart Paul wrote to his former congregation, ***"Now 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."***

The issue that was tearing the church apart could not continue but needed to end as soon as possible. Resolution was needed. Paul was trying to recapture the passion that the people held for their church when he was with them. Paul wrote, ***“That all of you be in agreement.”*** Instead of focusing on their differences, on what was tearing them apart, Paul was trying to rekindle their earlier passion. What brought them together in the first place was their love of the Lord Jesus, their sense of mission in reaching out and caring for the needs of others in that community united them. What united them was more powerful than what pulled them apart.

Sometimes we have to go back to the beginning, our mission and purpose, before we are able to move forward. It was time for the Corinthians to refocus. They needed to realize that there was more that united them than divided them.

“Be in agreement,” Paul pleaded, “that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” At one point in their journey they

claimed Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. In the early days of the church the people were united in their mission and ministry.

Paul was calling to the people to remember who they were and more importantly to whom they belonged.

There will be times when there will be disagreements among members of the church. There will be times when people do not see eye to eye and that is all right. From time to time there are issues that find people on opposite sides — again that is all right. We still must love and respect each other. We are united in our ministry and mission.

Paul was not urging uniformity, but rather celebrating our God-given gifts. God made us all different. Diversity within the congregation is a good thing, something to be celebrated, and not a cause for strife.

Later in 1 Corinthians, Paul compares the human body with the church, the body of Christ. Just as the human body has various parts, each performing different functions, so too does the church. Every believer has a God-inspired gift. We do not all have the same gifts, and we need not feel badly because someone else has different gifts. When we use our gifts together, united in our mission and purpose, we make a whole. The church would be a boring place if everyone was alike and thought the same way. Too much sameness would make it difficult to fulfill the mission and ministry of the church. God created us all to be different.

Following Paul the next pastor had different gifts; he might have been a better preacher. There were some in that congregation who in effect began following Apollos while others remained loyal to their former pastor claiming, "I belong to Paul." Still others said, "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." We know Cephas as the apostle Peter.

It is interesting that Peter is mentioned since there is no evidence that Peter ever visited Corinth. Nonetheless, there were some who claimed loyalty to Peter; others to Apollos and others to Paul. The situation was getting out of hand. A sure fire way to destroy a church is to break into divisive cliques. United we stand, with everyone working together toward the same goals. Divided we fall, breaking into divisive factions. There is no room in the church for such nonsense. The ministry and mission of the church will suffer when conflict cannot be resolved in a timely fashion.

The situation in the Corinthian church had to stop immediately, the mission and ministry of the church was at stake. Paul asked a series of rhetorical questions, ***“Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you?”*** The obvious answer to all of Paul’s questions is “no, of course not!” Paul wanted the people to see the absurdity of the situation.

Paul clearly knew what gifts he possessed and his mission, as he writes, ***“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.”*** The Lord Jesus sent Paul to preach the gospel, not with “eloquent wisdom” nor to baptize converts, but to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

United we stand! There is no telling what the church will accomplish with everyone working together for the common good, with a clear sense of vision and mission. When that unity of purpose does not exist, the church will falter and fall into petty quarreling. The ultimate result will be that the mission of the church will be sidetracked and nothing much will be accomplished. Divided we fail!

Back to the fictional church at Clyde's Corner, the one fighting over the giant red couch, a solution eventually was reached thanks to the leadership of its pastor. Everyone agreed that they needed to refurnish the parlor. The pastor pointed out that the couch was coming unglued and the veneers were splitting because of the extreme changes of temperature in the sanctuary. The pastor suggested having the couch repaired and

placed in the parlor, which is kept at the same temperature all week with committee meetings almost every night.

The church rallied together. All of Cedric's relatives agreed with Pastor Kirk's plan and the new people donated money for the entire project, including the cost of framing a portrait of Cedric Clyde to hang over his couch. A cross was hung behind the pulpit. The Sunday of the dedication, Pastor Kirk preached on the cross and then added, "When we took the old couch out of the chancel we drove the bad feelings out, and the cross brought a new spirit in." The church at Clyde's Corner had rediscovered its focus. Everyone's ideas and gifts were valued. Now the church could concentrate on its ministry and mission. Now the church could truly be the united body of Christ.

What are the red horsehair couches that are preventing us from rallying together to do the work of the church in our community? What is holding us back? There are people who are hurting who need to know Christ and the love and support of the church — people that we should be reaching.

May we continue to stand united in our mission and purpose as the church of Jesus Christ. We celebrate the gifts of each person who is part of our church family. To advance the mission of the church it takes everyone working together, not for personal recognition but for the glory of God.

Amen