

“Telling Stories of Connection”

Galatians 3:27-29

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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Going to church camp has been a significant experience for so many of us at First Christian. There are many reasons that such an experience is cited as being important. I have heard people talk about a week of church camp having the same impact on a young person as a year in Sunday School. I have heard people talk about the difference in how we experience things when we step outside our usual environment.

There were many things that were impactful for me as a teenager at church camp. It was a place where my faith was deepened. It was a place where my gifts for ministry were first identified and then nurtured.

It was also a place where I was aware that many of the things that usually divide people seemed to fade away. There are few places in my life where I feel like I have glimpsed the type of community the early church was striving to build in the ways I did when I was at the Christian Conference Center.

I remember, especially in high school, being acutely aware of the fact that some of the people I was closest to at camp were people I might not have even known if we'd gone to high school together. After all, high school life and relationships, especially at a large high school like I attended, are so often shaped by which classes we take and which activities we are involved in...which people seem most like us in class, race, or fashion...who we sit with in the lunchroom. And, at least back in my day, lunchrooms and lunch tables often had boundaries that were difficult if not impossible to cross.

But at church camp, I might look around and find myself in a group with someone who was a star athlete back home, another person whose grunge fashion and skateboard would have set them apart, someone whose social life was often sacrificed for studying, and a country kid who had just shown livestock the week before at the county fair. I would look around and realize that this group would never have come together back home. And yet, there we were. And somehow at camp it just made sense.

And from things we read about the early church in the book of Acts as well as reminders such as the one we heard from Galatians today, this was the goal. The early church, those followers of Jesus who were trying to keep his movement alive, seemed to understand in a way that wasn't common in their culture, that humans are by our very nature more similar than different, and that being *one* (being united), even with our differences, was what Jesus was about.

So, we read passages like the one Whitney read for us today and our hearts are warmed. “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no

longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28, NRSVUE).

Meanwhile, when we really pause with these words, we also know what a challenge Christian unity is.

Today is World Communion Sunday. Today we celebrate Christian unity. Today we name that even as Christians seem more and more deeply divided, in Jesus we are one. Today (and really here every Sunday), even as many Christians refuse to participate in communion with other types Christians, we gather with the table as our central symbol for unity.

And we can allow ourselves to be lulled into thinking this is easy. We are so used to hearing the words, "Everyone is welcome at the table" that we forget how unusual that is. And we sometimes forget how hard that unity is when we walk away from the table.

Today - on World Communion Sunday - we can admire the different textures and patterns of the cloths behind me; we can anticipate the taste of various breads; we can be grateful for the diversity of languages we have heard and seen. And while these all represent a fuller picture of the dream of unity, still we must admit that Christian unity is difficult.

In fact, our denomination, which Whitney reminded us grew out of the Stone-Campbell movement, a movement for Christian unity, is unfortunately not the only denomination to come from that movement. Rather, in an effort to bring Christians together, the movement, with unity as our polar star, birthed no fewer than three denominations.

And Christian unity remains important. In fact far more important that we sometimes admit.

I had a beautiful reminder of this just three weeks ago. Jim and I were in San Diego and decided to go to worship at the Disciples church nearest to where we were staying. Unbeknownst to us, they were without a Sr. Pastor and their other staff pastor was out of town. So they had a guest preacher.

As luck would have it, that person was Michael Kinnamon, who some of you know or recognize through the many roles he has had in the denomination and with the National Council of Churches, and who I know because he was the dean at Lexington Theological Seminary when I was a student there. So, what a treat it was to see him and to hear him preach. And, his sermon was a beautiful reminder about the importance of unity from someone who has spent his lifetime working for it.

Because unity is a core value of Christianity. It shows up throughout the New Testament. Jesus prays that his followers will be one. The early church breaks down barriers to claim the value of all people. We hear the proclamation that there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female (Galatians 3:28). And in I

Corinthians, when the people in the church were fighting about whose Christianity was better - whether it was those who learned it from Paul or Apollos or Cephas - Paul writes, "Has Christ been divided?" (I Corinthians 1:13).

And Michael Kinnamon, in response to that scripture, said this, "The basic point for Paul is not that persons should try to get along in the church. No. What he's saying is that all those who have communion with Christ have communion with all those who have communion with Christ. That's not the way it *should* be, that's the way it *is*. So, even if another member of the church betrays you or speaks falsely against you, the essential unity is not broken.

Kinnamon goes on saying, "I can hear the apostle shouting, 'You are one body, now act like it.'

"All this means that when we act with rancor toward other Christians, we're not just sinning against them, we're sinning against God or Christ" (Michael Kinnamon, sermon at University Christian Church in San Diego, CA, September 13, 2026).

Too often we choose to lose sight of this. And, on a practical level, it is difficult. The reality is that there are some who are claiming their Christianity in ways that offend us. The reality is that there are some who are citing their Christianity as a reason to inflict pain on others. The reality is that there are some whose Christianity we find ourselves doubting because the evidence seems to indicate that they don't know the same Jesus we do.

And even as there are real challenges to unity, still it is a core value.

Again quoting Michael Kinnamon, "Paul spends more time, not just more - far more time - in his letters telling diverse Christians how to fit together than he does telling them to proclaim the gospel. Why? Because our fitting together with all our difference *is* a visible expression of the gospel we proclaim....This is how we proclaim the gospel, at least one of the ways. Others should look at the church and say, 'I wonder how in the world they fit together. Black, white, brown, gay, straight, bisexual, young, old, in between, male, female, trans, rich, poor, liberals, conservatives, democrats, republicans, fed-up-with-it-alls...How do they fit together?' Which is when we point to Christ. We fit together because we all belong to him" (Kinnamon, September 13, 2026).

The reality is that unity is hard work. We can claim it. We can talk about it. We can want it. But it is hard work. And it is the work to which we are committed as followers of Jesus. Unless we are ready to divide up and parcel out the one who we follow, then we are called to remember that we are one...we are already one because Jesus is one.

And today we will go to the table. As an act of commitment. As an act of hope. As an act of saying that even hard work is work that is worth our time. As an act of remembering again that Christ is one and in Christ, we are one. May it be so.