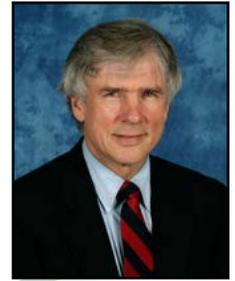




Hear the Word

from Pastor Timothy T. Weber



Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send

Third Sunday after Pentecost

January 27, 2019

Our Holy Life Together

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

“E Pluribus Unum”—Latin. Sound familiar? Originally it was the motto of the United States adopted by Congress in 1782. It is emblazoned across the scroll on the Great Seal of the United States. It’s stamped on the Statue of Liberty. It’s on all our money, bills and coins. It’s on all our passports and on many other official government seals—President, Vice President, Supreme Court. So, it must be really, really important! E Pluribus Unum “out of many, one.” From thirteen different colonies, one single nation. Many people, many places, many lands—into one country, so we hoped.

But as we read the headlines and feel the heartbeat of our country, E Pluribus Unum seems to be under great threat. Making one from many, even two in a marriage, is a daunting job. It has been said that marriage is the two becoming one, the trouble is deciding which one. We fight for turf even on the battlefield of love. Yes, we desire life together. We are social animals. We seek affiliations and affections. We are tribal. Birds of a feather flock together. But these same birds can have biting, bloody beaks. As grand as life together can be, it also demands some great measure of blood, sweat, and tears as Churchill put it. Sometimes it becomes too much. Groups split, marriages end, but our drive for togetherness leads us to regroup and remarry.

In our second lesson for today from I Corinthians, Paul is writing a letter to the Corinthian church, a group he had founded years before. Corinth was no small hamlet. It was a large city, a dominant commercial center of the Mediterranean world by the sea in southern Greece, jammed with all the noise and nastiness and beauty of the urban jungle. The church at Corinth was planted in the midst of a myriad of seductions and distractions—12 large temples, prostitution rings under the disguise of religious rites, so much so that the Greek verb “to Corinthianize” came to mean “to practice sexual immorality.”

Someone once said that the church is like Noah’s ark: If it weren’t for the flood outside, you couldn’t stand the stink inside.” Indeed the Corinthian church had a flood of danger on the outside, but there was an even bigger stink on the inside. Paul wrote this letter to address the stink inside the church—petty rivalries, jealousy, envy, deviant behaviors, chaotic church meetings, competition amongst leaders. It is interesting how Paul’s letters do not attempt to whitewash church life. Churches can be experts in pretending and covering up.

Paul is honest, speaking the truth with love. He writes about this in his letter to the Ephesians, chapter 4, linking truth with love as the key recipe in Christian fellowship. Truth without love is severe. Love without truth is like putting whip cream on a cow pie. Paul’s recipe for Christian

encounters is speaking the truth with love. This is a critical blend that is in short supply these days, where we love those like us and agree with us, and attack those who are unlike us and disagree with us. The tribe seems unable to grant space for rousing disagreements and diverse opinions. Often the alternative is to either shut up, keep silent, gossip in the corner, or pack your bags and find greener pastures with people just like you.

Notice Paul's approach. Throughout his letters to the Corinthian church, Paul did not skimp on acknowledging gifts in the community. He illuminated their many gifts, as we should. Micro-crediting, lifting up the appreciations and blessings in our life together is truly building up the body of Christ...as this congregation will do today. Our families, friendships, marriages also need to pay attention to building up each other because we are so good at doing the opposite. Scott Peck said "attention is the basic unit of love." Our distractions often keep us from attending and attuning to those right in front of us. Pray that God's Spirit will enable us more and more to do this as Paul did.

At the same time, as we all know, life together is packed with impatience, disagreements, disgruntlements, differing beliefs, competing directions. That's why Paul invokes the recipe of speaking the truth in love. To gloss over differences is to live in fear and pretending. Too many people live this way. This is the path of a slow death. Paul knows this, and thus he opens up these challenging conversations in Corinth for exposure and discussion. He is not afraid to move toward the conflicts with courage. But he does all this with confidence because of one thing: He knows dealing with the reality of life together is impossible if we simply rely on our capacities. Regardless of our talents, we are incapable. Doses of delight and some good management ideas are good ideas, but they cannot repair our broken humanity. Paul knows that our solid foundation lies in the word "holy." "Holy" is not about being pure, thank God, or we are all doomed. Holiness means being called out, summoned by another, dedicated to something bigger than us, better than us, beyond us, but very near us. What is this "holy life together"? Three key attributes stand out: Receive, Restore, and Reflect.

RECEIVE: Listen to this: It is better to receive than to give. Let me explain. We live in a world where we pride ourselves on being go-getters, doers, agents of change. We seek, we explore, we find, we discover, we build. We work to get credentials and validations. The early bird gets the worm, maybe, if you beat the other bird. Power wars pervade the highest chambers of the land. To stay employed you must compete for something, against someone. This is the air we breathe.

The first mark in our holy life together turns all this upside down. The world's megaphones shout-get big, get going, supersize your credentials. The world of God summons us to upside down thinking. Continue to improve yourself...but be sure you focus on what matters most: become small, slow down so that you are able to lift up your eyes to what you are receiving from the God of all good gifts. Our only true reference point is whose we are as receivers, not who we are as believers. True faith is clinging to this core truth, instead of getting whipped around by the little stories of ourselves. St. Paul leads off chapter 12 in 1 Corinthians with this critical reminder: "we were all baptized into one body...and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." Paul is crystal clear. It's not what we bring; it's what we receive that is the ground of our being. Baptism is our beginning and drinking of one Spirit is how it all keeps going. We bring nothing to baptism. Baptism is about solidarity with Christ. Baptism ties our life with the Lord. Baptism links all we are, all we have been, all we will become with the one God who holds all time and eternity. Our being and becoming only originates and is only sustained by the word of God and in the heart of God. The miracle of our life is all gift and grace. The big lie is that our identity is based on customer satisfaction surveys—how others treat us, how we are regarded, thumbs up or thumbs down. We should be interested in how we are doing and we should improve what we are doing. That's fine. But the problem is that we are not just interested in all these. These things, our résumés and the responses of others become gods, imprisoning us in the big lie of our little worlds. This is the path of anxiety and agitation.

St. Augustine said it this way, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." No wonder we live agitated lives, scrambling to find this and that instead of resting in the One whose hands will guide us and whose love will support us. Therefore, gratefulness should be the Christian's basic posture regardless of the circumstances. Henri Nouwen writes that we are invited to live in the quiet stream of God's love that lies beneath all the fluctuating affirmations and rejections of life. So many things come and go, rise up and fall down, succeed and fail. Happiness cannot be the goal of life. But deep beneath in the quiet stream of God's love, no matter what, we will receive all that we need. This is faith's foundation. In my daily meditation each morning, I pray this: "Thank you Lord for the wondrous gift of all creation, for the bright blessed days and the dark sacred nights, and for the precious breath of life today." Gratitude is the heart of our morning song. The Austrian monk David Stendl-Rast writes, "It is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful."

RESTORE: There are gifts galore in our life together. Thankfully, we are different from each other. St. Paul uses the image of the body to underscore how we need each other's gifts. The many members of the body, different as they may be, are essentially connected so that the one system works. What we lack, the other has. Paul writes the foot needs the hand, the eye needs the ear, the head needs the feet.

Virginia Satir once wrote this sweet line about life together. She said, "We come together in our similarities and we grow together in our differences." Our differences can be pains in our bee-hinds, but these differences can also be opportunities to learn from each other. If my wife and I were the same, we would both go nuts. We met at Holden Village long ago. She loved my drive and I loved her sweetness. We loved what we lacked, so we looked and took a leap called marriage a year later. And over time my wonderful drive could become like a steam roller knocking out trees in the process, and her beautiful sweetness could become overly sensitive like sun-burned skin. Interestingly, fights are often about the very things that once were attractions.

This is just a small sample of what happens when humans live in community with each other—churches, families, work groups. As sweet as we might all begin, our sheer humanity soon begins to undermine and fracture relationships—pettiness, competition, unfairness, stubbornness, deception, conflicts go underground, trust is fractured and breaks, someone gets something we deserved, we fear speaking up because of the backlash we may get, feeling offended leads some to disappear rather than talk, little groups speak unkindly of other little groups, responsibility is denied and blame is cast on others, and so on. It takes a lot of energy to manage all our internal suffering.

In our life together, there certainly is brokenness in so many ways. But the more important question is this: We are broken, but will we be broken apart or broken open? Broken apart is the way of the world. We build resentment rap sheets. We attack. We run. We hide. We get sick. Broken open is another matter. When broken open, in our weakened state before the cross of Christ, we pray that God's Spirit will surround us with peace, ground us in grace, and lighten our uncertain paths. The Hebrew word for salvation is translated "spaciousness." God's radical love breaks open our inflamed, imprisoned, restricted hearts to the spaciousness of God's miracles. Allow the God of all life to invade you and love when you cannot love. God will do the work. You are the pipeline when you cannot produce the product. Over and over and over through Biblical history God in the life of Christ restores the brokenhearted, restores the lost who are found, restores the blind from darkness, restores the unforgiven to forgiven, restores the poor to hope. In God's kingdom, there are always remodeling projects underway. It never ends, especially since our humanity seems to be always crying for repair. Let God be the author. You be the pen in God's creative hands.

REFLECT: If we truly have received and are constantly being restored, then there is much that can happen when we Christians are let loose in the world. We will be dangerous because the alternative reality of God's new world which we reflect will surprise and upset the worldly order of things. True hope is shocking. True forgiveness upends seething resentments. True sacrifice overturns self

interest. True spaciousness allows the many who would never come together because of differences, allows them to find new courage and strength to talk with each other in the safety of God's grace. If there is any community on this planet, in this country that should be able to reflect the capacity of the many becoming one, in spite of differences, it should be this community, life together under the canopy of God's blessedness. Can we give voice to our different political and social opinions in this congregation without fear? Can we stand for different ideas with the confidence that the Spirit will equip us with the gift of speaking the truth in love and the patience to encounter distressing differences? Will we allow God to hold our fluctuating agitations? Do we have the courage, as Nelle Morton said to "hear one another into speech" so that we can truly learn from the rich buffet of diversity and tough differences?

Christ was crucified for one reason—he was overly spacious, including many who others rejected from God's kingdom of love because they did not meet the standards. Christ was executed because the spaciousness for difference offended parameters of the powerful. The cross was the outcome. The cross represents the massive capacity of God's love, so massive, St. Paul described it as looking like foolishness from our safe little worlds. When in our holy life together we constantly are receiving, being ever restored again and again, then with joy and gratitude we will shine like the stars, reflecting the generous and sparkling God of all time and eternity. May this best and brightest and privilege to reflect God's living presence be granted to us over and over and over. In the name of Jesus. Amen.