

## Wesley United Methodist Church

June 11, 2017

“Be of One Mind.”

II Corinthians 13:11-13

There is an old story about a henpecked husband who went to a psychologist. He was tired of being dominated by his wife. The psychologist told him, “You do not have to accept your wife’s bullying. You need to go home right now and let her know that you’re your own boss.”

The husband decided to take the doctor’s advice. He went home and slammed the door on the way in. He confronted his wife and said, “From now on you’ll do what I say. Get my supper, then go upstairs and lay out my clothes. After I eat, I’m going out with the boys while you stay home. By the way, do you know who is going to tie my tie for me?” “I sure do,” said his wife calmly, “the undertaker.”

Some marriages are filled with conflict. So are some offices. Unfortunately some churches are filled with conflict as well. That seems unbelievable. But such things happen.

Bishop William Willimon tells about his first parish out of seminary in a rural area in North Georgia. The first visit he made to one of the churches in the parish, he found a large chain and padlock on the front door, put there, he was told, by the local Sheriff. “The Sheriff, why?” he asked.

“Well, things got out of hand at the board meeting last month,” he was told by one of the members. “Folks started ripping up carpet,” the member said, “dragging out the pews they had given in memory of their mothers. It got bad. The Sheriff came out and put that lock on until a new preacher could come and settle things down.”

“That,” says Willimon, “rather typified my time at that church. I would drive out there each Sunday, just praying for a miraculous snowstorm in October which would save me from another Sunday at that so-called church. I spent a year there,” he says, “that lasted a lifetime. I tried everything. I worked, I planned, I taught, I pled but the response was always disappointing. The arguments, the pettiness, the fights in the parking lot after the board meeting were more than I could take.”

One year serving that parish was all he could take. “You call yourself a church!” he muttered as his tires kicked gravel up in the parking lot on his last Sunday there. A couple of years later, he ran into the young pastor who followed him in serving that parish. Willimon’s heart went out to him. Such a dear young man. Only 23!

“They still remember you out there,” the other pastor said. “Yea,” Willimon said glumly, “I remember them too.”

“Remarkable bunch of people,” the other pastor said. “Remarkable,” Willimon agreed without further comment.

“Their ministry to the community has been a wonder,” the other pastor continued. “That little church is now supporting, in one way or another, more than a dozen of the troubled families around the church. The free day care center is going great. Not too many interracial congregations like them in North Georgia.”

Willimon could hardly believe what he was hearing. “What happened?” He asked.

“I don’t know,” his new acquaintance said. “One Sunday, things just sort of came together. It wasn’t anything in particular. It’s just that, when the service was done, and we were on our way out, we knew that Jesus loved us and had plans for us. Things fairly much took off after that.”

Bishop Willimon says, “I tell you what I think happened. I think that church got intruded upon. I think someone greater than I knocked the lock off that door, kicked it open and offered them peace, the Holy Spirit, mission and forgiveness. And now, they are [properly] called ‘church.’”

There is nothing more beautiful to God than a church that is united.

There are few things that grieve the heart of God like a church divided.

Few churches have been torn by conflict like the church at Corinth. They argued over everything. Paul pleads with them, “Listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.” In other words, our God is a God of peace and love. Those who follow Him will live in peace and love. Harmony in the body of Christ is more important than theology. That’s the first thing we need to see from today’s lesson.

Over the centuries the body of Christ has been torn by theological conflicts. Doctrinal differences have plagued us almost from day one. As a result, we have a sorry history of not getting along with one another. And it’s sad. As someone has put it: “Division drives our Lord away. Harmony invites him into our fellowship.”

This is Trinity Sunday. God in three persons--Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Do we fully understand this wonderful doctrine? No, but some of us will fight for it.

We don't understand the Trinity, but we're ready to go to war to defend it. Well, maybe not anymore. But there was a time when battles were fought over church doctrine, and even today churches are being split over whose interpretation of the Word is correct. And it's tragic.

Author and priest Anthony de Mello once told a captivating story about a bishop whose ship stopped at a remote island for a day. The bishop was determined to use the day as profitably as possible. He strolled along the seashore and came across three fishermen mending their nets. In pidgin English they explained to him that centuries before they had been Christianized by missionaries. "We, Christians!" they said, proudly pointing to themselves.

The bishop was impressed. Did they know the Lord's Prayer? He asked. They sadly confessed they had never heard of it. The bishop was shocked. How could these men claim to be Christians when they did not know something as elementary as the Lord's Prayer? "What do you say, then, when you pray?" the bishop asked.

"We lift eyes to heaven," they said. "We pray, 'We are three, you are three, have mercy on us.'"

The bishop was appalled at the primitive, downright heretical nature of their prayer. So he spent the whole day teaching them the Lord's Prayer. The fishermen were poor learners, but they gave it all they had and before the bishop sailed away the next day he had the satisfaction of hearing them go through the whole formula without a fault.

Months later the bishop's ship happened to pass by those islands again and the bishop, as he paced the deck saying his evening prayers, recalled with pleasure the fact that on that distant island were three fishermen who were now able to pray correctly, thanks to his patient efforts. While he was lost in thought he happened to look up and noticed a spot of light in the east. The light kept approaching the ship and, as the bishop gazed in wonder, he saw three figures walking on the surface of the water toward the boat. The captain stopped the boat and all the sailors leaned over the rails to see this amazing sight. When they were within speaking distance, the bishop recognized his three friends, the fishermen, and they were walking on the water, just like our Lord.

"Bishop!" they exclaimed, "we so glad meet you! We hear your boat go past island and come hurry, hurry meet you."

"What is it you want?" asked the bishop in awe.

"Bishop," they said, "we so sorry. We forget lovely prayer. We say: 'Our Father in heaven, holy be your name, your kingdom come' . . . then we forget. Please tell us whole prayer again."

The bishop felt humbled. "Go back to your homes, my good men," he said, "and each time you pray, say, 'We are three, you are three, have mercy on us!'"

Theology is important. But theology is not the same as faith. Theology is the human attempt to understand God. That is not the same as revelation which comes directly from God. Theology can be in error. We need to be humble about our theology and about church doctrine. And most certainly we cannot elevate these concerns over love for one another. By the way, St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing . . ." Harmony in the church is more important than church doctrine. God is a God of love and peace. God seeks for us to be a church of love and peace. This brings us to a second truth we need to see from this lesson.

True harmony does not mean merely tolerating our differences; true harmony comes from appreciating our differences. As a community, we are made stronger because we are different.

Some of us are quite literal in our understanding of scripture and church doctrine. Some of us are less so. Some of us embrace change quite freely. Others of us would prefer to hold on steadfastly to our traditions. Some of us prefer music that is lively, toe-tapping. Others of us prefer the great hymns of the church.

The question is, can we all get along? Can we love one another not only in spite of our differences, but can we recognize that our differences make us stronger?

When we express our differences and pray for God's guidance, then something good and positive will come out of our shared commitment. However, if we let our differences divide us, we will be doing the work of the devil.

Ralph Woerner tells a fable about a young lion and a mountain goat. Quite thirsty, the animals arrived at a water hole at the same time. They immediately began to argue about who would drink first. The disagreement becomes so heated that each decides he would rather die than give up the privilege of being first to quench his thirst. As each stubbornly confronts the other, their anger turns to rage. Just then something distracts them, and they both look up. Circling overhead

is a flock of vultures waiting for the loser to fall. That was all they needed to end their quarrel.

Woerner goes on to say, “There are those who have long waited for the church to fall. The vultures are circling overhead. We dare not lose time arguing over who is the greatest in the kingdom. Christ calls us to unity and service.”

I want to challenge you to pray for this church. Pray that we will love one another. Pray that God’s will will be done in our midst. And pray that we will be the kind of church that can lead people to Jesus. Paul pleads with the church at Corinth, “Listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.” That would be a good appeal for any congregation. And then we can put Jesus’ great commission into practice.

2. <http://www.chapel.duke.edu/worship/sunday/viewsermon.aspx?id=15>.
3. *The Song of the Bird* (New York: Doubleday, 1984). Cited by Barry J. Robinson, <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/b-or06-keeping.php>.
4. *Illusaurus*.

### **Children's Sermon**

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 13:11-14

Object: different shoes (or hats or shirts) to signify different roles in your life. You may have to modify this message to fit your life.

Good morning, boys and girls:

I brought a bunch of my shoes today, because I want to talk about all the different people that I am each week. Now that sounds strange, because I'm only one person, but I have many different jobs and parts to my life. For instance, these are some comfortable shoes that I wear around the house. At home I'm a husband (or wife), and a daddy (or mommy), so we can call these my husband (or wife) shoes. But when I come to work here at the church every day, I wear some slightly fancier shoes. We'll call these my pastor shoes. And sometimes I like to go out jogging (or be a Girl Scout leader--choose some hobby or post that occupies some of your time), and these are the shoes I wear to do that. Even though I'm one person, I have many different parts to my life. I am a husband (or wife), father (or mother), pastor, jogger (choose roles that describe your life).

God is like that, too. Even though there is only one God, God has three different roles in our lives. These three parts of God are called the Trinity. Trinity means "three." One of those roles is as God. God created us and loves us very much. Another role is as Jesus. Jesus is God in human form. Jesus suffered and died, and took all our sins away, so that sin doesn't have to control our life anymore. The third role is as the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of God. We can't see it, but we can feel it in our hearts. The Holy Spirit teaches us about God, and comforts us when we are sad and lonely. So even though there is only one God, God has three forms in our lives--God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.