



Glendive/Wibaux United Methodist Church  
August 19, 2018

Sermon Title: I Will Be a Unifying Church member

Scripture Reference: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

During World War II, Hitler commanded all religious groups to unite so that he could control them. Among the Brethren assemblies, half complied and half refused. Those who went along with the order had a much easier time. Those who did not faced harsh persecution. In almost every family of those who resisted, someone died in a concentration camp.

When the war was over, feelings of bitterness ran deep between the groups and there was much tension. Finally, they decided that the situation had to be healed. Leaders from each group met at a quiet retreat. For several days, each person spent time in prayer, examining his own heart in the light of Christ's commands. Then they came together. Francis Schaeffer, who told of the incident, asked a friend who was there, "What did you do then?" "We were just one," he replied. As they confessed their hostility and bitterness to God and yielded to His control, the Holy Spirit created a spirit of unity among them. Love filled their hearts and dissolved their hatred.

When love prevails among believers, especially in times of strong disagreement, it presents to the world an indisputable mark of a true follower of Jesus Christ.

(*Our Daily Bread*, October 4, 1992) [MichaelKenedyJr.wordpress.com/2013/12/1/](http://MichaelKenedyJr.wordpress.com/2013/12/1/)

We were just one. We were just one. How powerful a statement is this?

**Let us pray:** Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice. Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills, that we may serve you today and always. Amen



My title this morning is I...You... will be a unifying church member. The illustration from *Our Daily Bread* may be an extreme example in the history of church divisions. In the grand view, government interference in our church or religious life here in the U.S. would raise holy heck. We wouldn't, shouldn't, stand for it. It violates a basic tenet of our Constitution; the separation of church and state. Yet, most mainline churches and religions in the US have had or are having huge problems with interpretations of scriptures and church doctrines in light of our changing culture and civilian laws: Roman Catholics on the issue of ordaining women, birth control, and married men as priests. Lutherans and Presbyterians have each divided over the issue of women clergy and ordination of **LGBTQI** persons. I lived in a town with four Baptist Churches, all aligned within different umbrella organizations and they didn't even speak with each other.

The United Methodist Church wasn't, of course, always united. The church split over the issue of slavery and then over the elevation of freed blacks to be in leadership, much less, sit beside whites in church. And the United Methodist Church is undergoing its own possible split over the doctrines in our Book of Discipline. Christ's church is not even united universally. Christians have been fighting and arguing about who has the inside scoop on how to be a Christian since day one practically. So much for the unity of the big church?

But folks, in our own local congregations, churches, what can we do, rather than curse those who disagree with us, rather than throw in the towel and say I'd don't like you, or, I'm taking my toys and tithes and going to another congregation?

What can we do? We can work for unity.

At the very beginning of Chapter 2, I Am a Church Member, Rainer wrote,

“God desires for Christians to get along. In fact, He is emphatic about it. Jesus was clear when He said: ‘By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:35). Did you get that? The world will know if we are Christians or not by the way we who are believers act toward one another.” (pg 21)

Wearing a cross or cross and flame, or a T-shirt with, “God loves you and so do I,” printed on it, will not demonstrate you are a Christian by your love. These aren't talismans to protect you from evil. And just as important, is people will know if you lack love. If churches are only concerned for themselves and their own, that is lacking love. People will know it and that will get around.

Last week I spoke about how church membership doesn't come with an ID card or requirement for dues. You don't get a union card with church membership. What you have received as a church member is encouragement. Like Paul to the Ephesians, to walk in a manner worthy of



the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness with patience, bearing with one another in love. And, here is the kicker in the seat of our pants, **eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.** To prove we are a unified church, we must show we are a loving church.

Unity of the Spirit, of the church, is not an optional item on the menu of church membership responsibilities and assignments. Yet it is all too often pushed to the sidelines. I've heard it from day one even as I came here. A sad tale of hurt feelings among the congregation and people left. Folks who didn't like the local church leadership or our Bishop, so they left. And other places when people shared private conversations that embarrassed folks, so they quit coming. Oftentimes we can't even agree to disagree in a spirit of love!

So, allow me to talk a little about gossip as a barrier to church unity. As I read Paul's missive to the Romans 1:29-31, think about all the evils on his list of behaviors and characteristics church people should avoid.

"29 So they were filled with all injustice, wicked behavior, greed, and evil behavior. They are full of jealousy, murder, fighting, deception, and malice. They are gossips, 30 they slander people, and they hate God. They are rude and proud, and they brag. They invent ways to be evil, and they are disobedient to their parents. 31 They are without understanding, disloyal, without affection, and without mercy."

Wow! Paul was addressing the specific failings of a group of Gentiles who weren't getting with the early church program, you might say. And still, gossip right up there with murder, pride and other wicked behavior. It's simple. Gossip and negative talk can destroy a church. Anyone ever hear a parent or teacher say, "Watch your tongue!" What about, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all!" These admonitions stand the test of time.

We are too ready to share information about others, positive or negative. Social media and parking lot conversations are breeding grounds for gossip. And gossip is a form of power; I know it and I am more powerful because I do know it and I will show you just how powerful I am by telling you what I know.

Will Rogers is believed to have said, "The only time people dislike gossip is when you gossip about them." (<https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/gossip>)

This propensity to gossip might have worked to my benefit in my law enforcement career, but not so much for church folk. And there is a difference between gossip, malicious or otherwise, and necessary information getting to the right people. Like don't assume I already know someone is sick or in the hospital, needs a visit or there's something in the community I need to attend. Share that with me. But then don't share it with everyone else.

Years ago, I was charged with slander in a Turkish court. They have very strong slander laws there. Perhaps based on religious principles. I had investigated the wife of an active duty Air Force NCO for bribery. She was a Turkish citizen. Now I proved the allegations against her. But during the inquiry there was information about her having an affair. This was in my report.



And it was that ‘slander’ in her mind, that she took to court. Now I was, and still consider myself a Turkish linguist. But there are very few things that intimidate me like testifying in a court of law where all the proceedings are carried out in a foreign language. In the end, it went okay for me, but it was an experience. So, I can certainly empathize with foreign nationals, unaccompanied kids and others in this country, who have to go to immigration or criminal courts conducted in English. My heart and prayers and my actions go out to them.

Throughout Europe there are medieval torture museums. Well, they are museums to law enforcement practices hundreds of years ago. I liked to satisfy my prurient leanings and usually would visit them. And the numerous toy museums, by the way. Apparently, gossip and slander were truly serious problems back then. They were crimes. And the punishments were things like putting a metal helmet on the offender’s head and pulling their tongue out to hold it steady. Not fun. Gossip hurts a church and it destroys communities too.

So Rainer puts it this way:

1. “Don’t be a source of gossip. If you have any doubt whether something is gossip or not, don’t mention it. Keep your tongue under control.”
2. “If someone in the church begins to share gossip with you, gently rebuke him or her. You don’t have to be harsh in your response to them. Kindly say that you would rather not hear any gossip and you would hope it wouldn’t continue to spread.” (pgs 25-26)

Basically, follow an old Jewish proverb I came across, “What you don’t see with your eyes, don’t witness with your mouth.”

Thank-God and Jesus, there is a cure for pain and suffering caused by gossip. That is forgiveness. As gossip kills; forgiveness cures. Clearly, we see this evidenced in the Brethren Assemblies after World War II. We see forgiveness in South Africa post-Apartheid. We see forgiveness curing broken families, neighbors and communities. Acts of reconciliation and forgiveness are difficult but will unite a church or community as nothing else can.

Forgiveness cannot be forced. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting what makes you feel wronged. Forgiveness is not just forcing a three-year old to apologize for biting their playmate. It must be sincere, and not just done because there might be repercussions if you don’t.

Let me share some statistics I found:

In the King James Version 28 times Old Testament and 28 times New Testament concepts related to forgiveness were mentioned.

New International Version has 42 and 32 mentions respectively

NRSV cites forgiveness concepts 37 times in Old Testament and 28 in New Testament



Folks, forgiveness is a foundational principle of living a Christian life, a Christ like life. Whether we forgive, how we do it and how we sustain our love for one another will show others how we understand our Father's forgiveness and Jesus's words on the cross. And I must add, whether and how we forgive others, says something about our ability to forgive ourselves!!!

Now my pledge for the week and my hope on your behalf.

*I am a church member. I will seek to be a source of unity in my church. I know there are no perfect pastors, staff, or other church members. But neither am I. I will not be a source of gossip or dissension. One of the greatest contributions I can make is to do all I can in God's power to help keep the church in unity for the sake of the gospel.*

And now on your behalf.

We are church members. We will seek to be sources of unity in our church. We know there are no perfect pastors, staff, or other church members. But neither are we. We will not be sources of gossip or dissension. One of the greatest contributions we can make is to do all we can in God's power to help keep the church in unity for the sake of the gospel.

Amen and Selah

Notes: With grateful appreciation to Michael Kennedy, Jr. and his essays on WordPress. Com, 2-13/12/1