

“Staying United Despite Our Differences”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

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Galatians 6:7-16 Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, **let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.** See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised – only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. **For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!** As for those who will follow this rule – peace be upon them, and mercy and upon the Israel of God.

Part of last weekend I spent attending a Beth Moore conference in Cincinnati with a group of women from John Knox. Throughout our time together, she talked about our crazy world in which we live in. Her husband had prayed with her before her time with us and the word that was on his heart was “disoriented”. Beth shared the definition of the word “disorient” is to make someone lose their sense of direction or to make someone feel confused.

In a time when there is so much violence and uncertainty in our society, it is very easy for us to lose our way. I don’t know about you but it seems as if our world has been turned upside down. The actions of others and how they are treating each other makes absolutely no sense.

Beth closed the conference with urging the community of faith to stick together. She said we can have the Evangelicals in their little circle, the Reformed in their little circle, the Pentecostals in their little circle, the Catholics in their little circle. But the bottom line is we must stay united.

We can debate about all the little details of our denominations or independent churches that make us different. She called these rib issues. The things we need to focus are the spinal issues. These are the things that will keep us standing. One of the spinal issues is Jesus Christ died on the cross to save us from our sins and that he was resurrected from the grave so that we can have eternal life. That is what will keep us held together so that we can face whatever lies ahead. Don’t get bogged down in the rib issues.

The apostle Paul is writing to the church in Galacia today and setting them straight on the rib issues and the spinal issues. The new believers are getting pressure from some outside Jewish-Christian missionaries who have rolled into town with their “old school” beliefs. They are holding onto the Law of Moses which says that they must be circumcised. These people are not bad guys. They just want to convert the new church over to their way. They are just hung up on their differences. The human ego has gotten in the way. Tension is so thick between the people.

Paul is saying “get over it!” He points to his hand writing and with large letters he says “There are no differences when it comes to the cross of Jesus Christ!” There is no circumcision or uncircumcision when it comes to the cross. “For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! When you became a believer in Christ, you were made new which frees you from the old way of thinking. As a new creation, you are able to look past

the differences and stay united despite it. In that unity, Paul promises that the church will find peace and mercy with God.

How do we as a church measure up to Paul's teaching? I think it goes back to the beginning of this scripture when it talks about sowing seed for the harvest. Many of us recall the verse, "You reap what you sow." The Message goes on to say, "The person who plants selfishness, ignoring the need of others – ignoring God – harvests a crop of weeds. But the one who plants in response to God letting God's Spirit do the growth work in him, harvests a crop of real life, eternal life." (The Message; Eugene Peterson; p. 2124) When we sow our seed, what do we reap or produce?

Carol Holtz-Martin offers 2 statements for us to consider as well as stories as examples.

- *The true gospel produces a church in which unity exists with remarkable diversity.*
There was an American Baptist missionary assigned to a church in Beirut, Lebanon. The Muslims there were being introduced to Christ. When it came time for them to celebrate Communion, the doctrine of the denomination stated that those who had been publically baptized were the only ones welcomed at the table. In Lebanon, those who were found to be baptized could experience severe penalties such as shunning, disinheritance or even death. There was great discernment, asking God who should be allowed to take the bread and the cup. As time went on, many had heard God loud and clear, "This is my table. It is not yours. It doesn't belong to any denomination's doctrine. This table is the Lord's table." At this table, they harvested seeds of unity despite their remarkable diversity.
- *The true gospel produces a church of miraculous unity.*
The Amish Community of Nickels Mines, Pennsylvania in 2006 was shaken by Charles Roberts, who opened fire in their school killing 5 children, injuring 5 and then turning the gun on him. The miracle happened when they astounded the world by harvesting seeds of grace with the family of the shooter. The Amish Community outnumbered the Non-Amish at the funeral of Charles Roberts. They brought food to the Roberts' home. As money flooded in from mourning Americans, they shared it with the family. This is not about everyone giving up their car or electricity. It is seeing how these people with incredibly different beliefs reached out and despite everything were united with this family during their time of grief.

Does John Knox church produce unity that exists with remarkable diversity and do we produce miraculous unity despite our differences? This next week we will celebrate Vacation Bible School. Our theme this year focuses on how with God the ordinary can become the extraordinary. We welcome everyone into our church – no matter their background – no matter their differences. Our attendance tends to be one-third church members and the rest are children from Iglesia Nueva Creación or the community. We will host Jon and Kelly Simpson who we have partnered in ministry with for years. We will host Liz Arrieta from Cancun, Mexico. Both Liz and the Simpsons along with our Hispanic neighbors speak a different language than we do. Our worship service will be diverse as it will be lead bilingually.

As we sow the seeds next week, it may be a stretch out of our comfort zone. Every year I am challenged by this week. But I am also doubly blessed by the harvest that is produced. It is tough to focus on the cross and not on our the differences. But thanks be to God for you will see a new creation in worship in 2 weeks and a new creation is everything. This is what can give hope for this troubled world. Amen.