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Our Unity Must Be Concrete

a sermon on 2 Corinthians 9

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Do I detect some nervousness? Are you thinking, “Oh, no! A sermon about stewardship!”? You read about the budget shortfall in the newsletter, and now you hear a passage about being a cheerful giver, and you put two and two together, and here we go, right? No, not quite.

This is not a sermon about stewardship, though this is a classic text for that topic. I have always found it inspiring, encouraging, and challenging when I think about how I use money. But this sermon is about something else. Unity. Our unity as Christians. Not Christian unity on a grand scale – such as working with other denominations or Christians in other nations. Our unity as a congregation. If charity begins at home, so does unity.

Our unity must be concrete. Abstract unity is nothing. It’s not real. True unity only exists in the concrete actions of life. Shared meals, helping a member move, bringing meals to the sick, taking a grieving friend to lunch, teaching a class of children, sending a card, making a call, building a friendship – these are ways our unity becomes real.

When our unity is real, it is powerful. Not only does it sustain us spiritually, it also gives the rest of the world something to think about. Maybe we have something people are looking for. Maybe they don’t know they’re missing it until they see us enjoying it. Maybe they recognize their desire for a sense of belonging and acceptance, but they think it’s impossible to find. Or maybe, just maybe, the quality of our life together might help someone believe in the power of God. Stranger things have happened.

So why this passage? If this sermon is about unity, why a passage in which Paul shakes down the church in Corinth for cash? Paul was a master of the subtle arm-twist, wasn’t he? The Corinthian church had made a big pledge to his special collection. He reminds them of this, adding that he told their neighbors about it, and they were inspired to give generously. So now, if the Corinthians don’t come through, both they and Paul will be humiliated. This really would be good for a stewardship sermon. What it is really about, though, is Christian unity. Let me tell you the whole story.

Paul, as you know, was the apostle to the Gentiles. Gentiles are anyone who is not Jewish. Paul was a Jew – very much so – but God sent him to tell the non-Jewish world

about Jesus. This was a big deal for Paul. It was big deal for the whole church. Some Christians thought he was going overboard. They thought Gentiles ought to first convert to Judaism and only then embrace Israel's Messiah. But God thought otherwise, and so did the church. Israel's Messiah is the Savior of the world. That had been God's plan from the very start. God was now opening the covenant to all who believe in Jesus. Gentiles could be part of God's people!

To understand what Paul did, you have to understand that bringing Jews and Gentiles together in one church was a lot like racially integrating a church in the Deep South in the early 1960s. Anti-Semitism was alive and well in the first century. Gentiles often looked down on Jews. Claudius even expelled all Jews from Rome. On the other side, many Jews considered Gentiles unclean and would not eat with them. Paul was convinced, however, that one of the best evidences for the truth of the gospel was its power to unite different kinds of people. Take Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, slave and free, educated and uneducated, women and men – and blend them together in a new family, the family of God. Then you will see God's power. That was what Paul was doing.

In the local churches he started, this unity existed concretely in the life of the people. Shared meals, worship, and the Lord's Supper were important examples. Back then sharing a meal with someone carried profound social implications. These were "your kind of people." A meal created a bond, which is one thing the Lord's Supper is supposed to do. Meals function differently in our culture, so we need to remember that. Also, no society in the first century was as individualistic as ours. No society at any time and place ever has been. Every person in that day lived in a densely layered social network. At the heart of it all was the family, which is why rules about marriage and honoring parents were so important. I'm not suggesting, by the way, that we have outgrown those rules, but rather that we suffer because we do not take them as seriously as we ought. Anyway, family was everything. Very often the church functioned as a family.

And I mean it functioned literally as a family. Today when we talk about the church as a family we mean it metaphorically. Church is like a family, but easier to put up with ... maybe. Back then, when a person became a Christian, he or she may well have been disowned by his or her real family. This happens today in Muslim countries and in India. What do you do when family is essential to basic survival but your family kicks you out? The church becomes your family.

Paul went around making Jews and Gentiles family. In the local congregation, this unity found concrete expression. But Paul had a larger vision. He wanted to make a statement, particularly to those Jewish Christians skeptical of Gentile believers, but also to non-believing Jews and the larger world. He wanted to show them all a powerful

demonstration of Christian unity and thus gospel power. The project he came up with was a special collection of money.

Christians in Jerusalem were predominantly Jewish. They were also poor. In the earliest days of Christianity, rich Christians would help the poor, even going so far as to sell property. Remember Barnabas. Hard times had come, though. Persecution had hurt the church, causing many Christians to go live someplace else. A similar thing is happening in our own day as Christians in the Middle East immigrate to the West. It is always the brightest and most affluent who are able to pick up and go. Also, there were probably hard times generally. So the church in Jerusalem in Paul's day needed financial help.

Paul saw in his mostly Gentile churches a source of help. He organized his collection to (a) meet a real need in Jerusalem and (b) demonstrate the unity between the Gentile churches and the Jerusalem church.

The New Testament gives us fascinating glimpses of how his plan worked. He wrote to his churches and urged them to give generously, explaining to them what was at stake. He also provided for financial accountability. Each church that gave sent two representatives with Paul to Jerusalem. They would see the money reached its destination, and they would be a Gentile delegation to the Jerusalem church. It may have been the first short-term volunteer mission trip in Christian history. The Jerusalem church would see first-hand the fruits of Paul's mission to the Gentiles, and the visitors would go home with stories of the Jerusalem church and its strength despite persecution.

Paul's plan worked well, with just one problem. While he was in Jerusalem he was arrested by the local authorities. He spent a couple of years in prison before he appealed to the Emperor, who in all likelihood sentenced him to death. Paul knew going to Jerusalem was dangerous. His friends had encouraged him not to go. He went anyway, knowing the risks, because the unity of the church was too important.

All this is the background behind our scripture reading. Paul organized a collection as a concrete expression of unity between his churches and the church in Jerusalem. By giving generously to it, the church in Corinth proved unity was for them something more than an idea. They made it reality. We did basically the same thing, by the way, a few years back when we gave to help build three churches in Bangladesh, where we support missionaries.

This sermon, however, is not about that kind of thing, important though it is. I start with the principle that unity must be concrete. Then I ask you to consider our congregation. I've already mentioned many ways we make our unity real. Worship, meals, helping one another – yet areas of concern remain.

One of our great strengths is our closeness and love for one another. One weakness always inherent in that strength is: The closer a group of people is, the more difficult it is for new members to penetrate the circle and become insiders. One way we can make our unity real is by reaching out to newer people and drawing them in. Let's try to make it as easy as we can. Invite newer people to do the things you do. Get to know newer people. We try to assign mentors to new members to help them figure things out. Be a mentor. When it comes to integrating new people into our church we're not bad, but we could be better.

One thing I would really like to see: more friendships among our young adults. We have twenty families with children Middle School age and below. With a few exceptions, we see one another at church, but we don't do things together outside of church, and we don't really know one another very well. I've noticed people in the supper club and the lunch club are much closer. The people my age haven't gelled as a group like that yet.

At a recent cookout we tried something new. People tend to sit with the same group of friends at meals. This is true of church dinners. Look around and you'll see. Anyway, when we ate, everyone was in a predictable spot. After the meal we went inside. I gave everyone a slip of paper with a number. Each person sat with a group based on the number. These groups were not predictable. People were with others they do not often sit with. So they sat down and answered a series of questions: What is your hometown? If not Mobile: When and why did you move to Mobile? If Mobile: Where did you go to high school? If your child/children go to school or daycare, where? When and why did you get involved with Westminster? What other denominations (beside Presbyterian) have been important in your life? What do you most like to do?

The results were amazing. We began to learn interesting things about one another and find shared interests. I was surprised by what I learned. One guy plays league soccer. I had no idea. Just that kind of thing. And that activity was only a beginning. We need to look for more ways to build friendships.

I encourage everyone to sit with someone new at our next fellowship dinner. If Paul can get arrested and martyred for Christian unity, you can go out of your way to get to know someone new. If you don't usually come to those dinners, come to one once in a while, just to get to know people.

I am optimistic we can build good friendships. That goal is achievable. I have another dream I fear may be just a dream because it is nearly impossible for any church to realize. As churches go, we are well above average when it comes to caring for one another. We respond beautifully to bereavement and cancer. We respond well to practical needs, such as help after hurricanes. We do the best we can with financial

problems. I wonder how well we respond to divorce. I suspect we could do better. I know there are other sorts of issues folks would be reluctant to bring up. If someone were struggling for holiness against same-sex attraction, or if their child or grandchild adopted an alternative lifestyle, would they be confident of finding loving support or would they fear judgmental attitudes? Church should be a place where you can bring any struggle to light and find help. In reality, this is very hard for any church to attain. A church that responds to one kind of problem well almost certainly fails when faced with a different problem. We will never live up to the ideal, but by God's grace we can be better.

God has done a wonderful thing in bringing us all together. If you ask me where I see God's hand most clearly at work here, that would be my answer. He has taken people of different ages, races, languages, Auburn fans and Alabama fans; people different in so many ways – income, education, family situation – and he has made us a family. Our unity is a precious gift he has given to each of us. Now that we are here, however, it is up to us – with the Holy Spirit's help, of course – to make that unity real. To be real, it has to be concrete. It is concrete when we do things together. Amen.

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