

# UNITY

## Galatians 3:26-28

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My passion in preaching is to connect the biblical message to our everyday lives. I firmly believe that the overarching themes of the Bible have wisdom for us. They help us navigate our relationships, balance work and family, cope with life's challenges, understand our purpose, and guide us towards ways we can make a difference for good in the world.

Biblical advice, however, is rarely of the cut-and-dried variety. The Bible doesn't tend to give easy answers to complicated questions. Remember how many times Jesus answers a question with a question? The Bible acknowledges that we live in a world of complexity. The ten commandments are written in the language of certainty, but there's far more in the Bible that's ambiguous. Still, we find in these pages and in these stories a sense of direction.

When I prepare a sermon, I think about the issues of our lives and how the biblical message connects to those questions we are living. So from time to time over the next several months, I will be addressing the political climate in America. Certainly not to tell you how to vote, or what to think, but to shed light on our current situation based on the biblical message.

I learned recently just how much our political climate has changed in my lifetime. To me, this realization was stunning. Here's what I learned. In 1960, a poll was taken in this country, asking this question: "Would you be distressed or displeased if your child married someone of the opposite political party as you?" In 1960, do you know how many people answered "yes" to that question? 4.5%. Less than 5% of Americans would have been bothered by their child marrying someone of a different political persuasion.

In 2010, the same question was asked and those answering "yes" were 43%. I suspect it would be considerably higher today, don't you?

I don't have to say much more to describe our current scene. You know how polarized we are. In one study, employers were given resumes of applicants that included notes about their political affiliation - the resume might include, for example, a note that the applicant had been a part of a political student organization on campus - Young Democrats or Young Republicans. The employer was 80% more likely to choose the candidate who shared her or his political persuasion.

Not only are we holding our views more strongly, but we are vilifying people whose views differ from our own. We tend to think less of people who disagree with us politically.

Blaming isn't necessarily helpful, but it is helpful to be aware of some of the causes of our polarization. Most likely, the rise of cable news channels has contributed in large part. There was a time when media was more objective, and most of us watched one of three news reports. We were all listening to the same voices and it had a unifying effect.

Now, liberals watch MSNBC and conservatives watch Fox. We may tune in, originally, for noble purposes - to be educated - but we stay tuned because, most of us anyway, like to hear people who agree with us. We like to hear our beliefs justified. We may even like to hear the other side belittled.

I'm not telling you what to watch or not watch on TV, but I do call all of us to an awareness of what our habits are, and how they're shaping our behavior. Is it the best use of our time and our mental resources to listen only to people who agree with us? Does it help us to maintain open minds and hearts? Or is it encouraging the polarization of our nation? Is it making us more suspicious of those who disagree with us?

Division isn't new in human society; it was a major problem in the early church. In Bible Study this past fall we read the book of Acts, the story of the early church. The church had barely hung its first shingle when infighting broke out. The paint wasn't dry yet, the hymnals hadn't even been ordered, and yet people were squabbling. Who were the best Christians?

The ones who had started as Jews? Or the ones who had started as Gentiles, non-Jews? Did the Gentiles need to obey all of the Jewish laws? There were many opinions about that. What exactly do we believe about the resurrection and the second coming? On and on they debated and the debates weren't always civil or helpful.

In our word for today from Galatians, Paul cries out for unity. He calls for the church to find its unity in Christ, and to show a unified face to those outside the church.

Unfortunately, the church has been a spectacular failure at unity throughout its history. Our heritage is one of splits and splinters, new churches forming whenever people disagreed about a matter of theology or biblical interpretation or worship style, whenever people argued about who was welcome and who was not.

As I think about that history, though, I have to say that I'm grateful for some of it. Quite personally, I'm grateful that there are churches that accept and embrace women in leadership roles. I'm grateful that there are churches like ours which believe that the Bible is to be read seriously but not literally. Not all divisions are bad. We're not all alike. The church has thrived sometimes because people have been able to find a worshiping community that was the best fit for them at a particular time in their spiritual journey.

The problem is not that we're different, the problem is not that we have two political parties. In fact, many people believe our nation would be healthier if we had more parties. The problem is the polarization, the inability to talk to each other, listen to each other, and learn from each other. It's a problem in the church and in society at large. The problem is the entrenchment, each side digging in heels, convinced that they are 100% right and others 100% wrong. It's led to gridlock in Washington, and when our nation is not working effectively, it's the people who have the least who are hurt the most.

And at a local level, how much more could we accomplish for good if we found our commonality instead of focusing on how right we are and how wrong the other guy is?

For example, I know for a fact that we in this room do not all agree on the issue of climate change. But the Bible clearly tells us to take good care of this earth which has been entrusted to us. We all agree that we want to leave the planet healthier than we found it. Surely there are ways we can work together if we set our mind to it.

I'm not naive; I know these things are difficult. But we are mandated by scripture to try. To find our common ground in the way of life that Jesus taught and lived.

We don't all agree on the issue of gun control, but we can all agree that we want our children to grow up in safe communities. Our entrenchment is getting us nowhere. The Bible clearly tells us to work for peace and justice. We have to try. To get beyond the labels and slogans and name-calling and work together.

In March, a woman named Nancy Jacobson appeared at the Cleveland City Club Forum. She has founded a bipartisan group of senators and representatives who have pledged to work together to accomplish important legislation. This is what she says about her organization: "the prevailing hurdle preventing our nation's progress isn't disagreement over particular policies. It's an attitude – specifically, the hyper-partisan viewpoint that leads far too many of our leaders (and citizens) to completely dismiss, ignore or question the motives of people from the other party." Her organization brings people together. It sounds like good news to me, and the kind of organization a Christian might want to support.

Other people have talked about a movement that is sometimes called "the third way"; it's an international movement which tries to move people away from thinking that there are just two options. Whether it's the Israeli-Palestinian crisis or any hot-button issue in this country, proponents of the third way encourage dialogue and listening. They are of the belief that we can learn from people with whom we disagree, that we can treat one another respectfully.

A colleague of mine in Minnesota\* has as one of his parishioners the national high school debate champion. He had coffee with her recently and talked with her about winning the

national award in debate. She said to him, “I knew I’d like learning and competition. What surprised me is that I really liked figuring out how other people think. You can’t win a debate without getting completely inside the opposite position. You try to climb into the other person’s brain and understand their argument backwards and forwards. In the process, you see how other opinions are formed. You may not change your mind, but that’s not the point. You see the other person as a person.”

Friends, how will we live during this election season? How will we treat one another? I’m not asking you to back down from any position you feel God has called you to. I’m not asking you to weaken your beliefs in any way. I’m talking about the art of listening, knowing that each of us has a story and that those stories shape our opinions. I’m talking about treating one another with dignity and respect. Jesus disagreed vehemently with the Pharisees, yet if one of them invited him to dinner in their home, he accepted. He saw them as people. He didn’t water down his opposition to their belief systems, because he saw those belief systems as detrimental to his values. But he didn’t call them names, he didn’t make fun of them; he treated them as human beings. That’s what unity in Christ looks like.

Let me read you a verse from the Hebrew Scriptures, 2 Chronicles 7:14: “if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” How badly do we need to have our nation healed? When we learn to be humble, says this scripture, healing will come.

Let us pray. Help us, God, to find our unity in Christ, so that this nation will be healed and your people will live in dignity and hope. Amen.

\*Thanks to my colleague, the Rev. Allen Hilton, for this sermon’s inspiration.