

Blest Be the Tie That Binds

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Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 10, 2023

Scripture

1 Corinthians 12:1-13, 27-31

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that when you were gentiles you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

...

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work powerful deeds? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Sermon

Over the summer, in meetings (both within the church and the wider community) and conversations with a variety of people in the congregation, three related words began to emerge: connection, community, and belonging. Earlier this year, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy warned that isolation and loneliness pose a profound public health threat. More than half of the U.S. adults experience loneliness, which has consequences for mental and physical health,

including a greater risk of depression, anxiety, as well as heart disease, stroke, and dementia. The U.S. is certainly not alone in this regard. In 2018, in the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Theresa May appointed a Minister for Loneliness. These trends toward social isolation were noticeable before COVID, but, like so much in our lives, the pandemic accelerated rates of change and degree. [1]

It's clear that many people of all ages are searching for connection, for community, a place where they feel they belong, where they feel welcomed, affirmed, and safe, where they can grow and thrive and flourish. Just this week in the New York Times, Nicholas Kristof wrote about the critical need in our society to build social connections that bind us together in healthy ways. "Loneliness crushes the soul...and breaks the heart literally and figuratively," he writes. "Loneliness is as deadly as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and more lethal than consuming six alcoholic drinks a day, according to the surgeon general." [2] A majority of Americans now report experiencing loneliness, based on a widely used scale that asks questions such as whether people lack companionship or feel left out. More than half of Americans say that no one knows them well. The percentage of high-school students who report "persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness" shot up from 26 percent in 2009 to 44 percent in 2021. [3]

These are serious societal and personal issues, but they are also theological issues. As we know, the Bible has a lot to say about belonging and community, the need to connect with neighbors and strangers, the environment and the wider world, God, and with ourselves. The church, therefore, has something invaluable to offer the world for the living of these days.

As we kick off a new program year here at CPC, I would like to put a spotlight on the upcoming year. Our life together will center around themes of connecting and belonging, that is, deepening our understanding of what it means for us to be a community of the Risen Christ called to love neighbor, God, and self. You'll see our theme reflected in all areas of our life together: worship, educational offerings for children, teens, and adults, mission and justice advocacy, and fellowship opportunities. We'll explore ways to deepen our connection with each other, with our neighbors, the broader community, the environment, and deepen the connection with ourselves and, ultimately, with God.

Connecting and belonging.

The fall issue of the Messenger went out on Thursday—and if you haven't seen or read it yet, you need to. The threads of community, connection, and belonging are woven through every page.

The adult education offerings begin with a theological and cultural exploration of trends in American society and the church related to our theme. Starting in October and throughout the year, we will look at Christian Nationalism, including White Christian Nationalism, which has much to say about how we determine who belongs and who doesn't. We will also engage these issues with our siblings in Christ at Grace AME. In November, we'll explore how we connect with the environment and care for creation. Thursday Morning Bible Study will focus on themes of unity and community in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

And, something new, Michael Cuppett created an online portal that went ‘live’ on Thursday: catonsvillepres.org/belonging. There, you will find links to all the articles and resources discussed in adult ed, and we will continue to grow this resource library for many areas of the church’s life, all focused on belonging. You can read the articles whether you attend or not adult ed on Sunday mornings. You can be included in the conversation. Information about TMBS and Contemplative prayer are also there. We are very excited about this.

You will have new opportunities to cultivate your prayer life to connect and reconnect with God. There will be more opportunities for fellowship, for koinonia, to be together, share a meal together, and deepen our relationships and connections with one another. New opportunities to serve the community. New opportunities to get involved.

As we emerge from the pandemic, and as we rediscover who we are as a church, I know people are curious about how to get more involved in the life of the church—and we need folks to step up and step into the life of the church. Where is the Spirit calling you to use and share your gifts, talents, skills, energy, passion, and love? Maybe you would like to sign up to host fellowship hour one Sunday? Would you like to usher? Would you like to help when we have special services at the church, such as memorials or funerals? Where would you like to get more involved? Do you like to sing? Are you curious about the work of a particular committee, such as mission or buildings and ground or Christian education?

If you go to the Belonging portal, we’ve made it easy for you to sign up, volunteer, or just express an interest in the work of a committee without signing up right away. You’ll find a brief description of what each of the committees do. Just check what interests you, and we’ll be in touch. You can also nominate yourself or someone else to serve on one of our elected boards, Session, Deacons, Childcare Council, or Envision.

We need to remember that at the center of the church, at the center of our life together is Jesus Christ. And “we” – collectively, are the body of Christ— “and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27). This is who we are, the church, by virtue of our baptism. And we can’t be the church if we’re our own, alone, but only in community, in through the collective. The community is held together through the Spirit. And the Spirit is at work to build and grow the body of Christ, not in terms of numbers, but in faith, mature faith, toward discipleship, toward love. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:12-13). And the Spirit works to pull and draw and nudge us into community, deeper and deeper into a relationship with Christ, one another, ourselves, and the world that God loves.

When the church is truly being the church of Jesus Christ—that is a holy and good and beautiful thing, and the world takes note, and people are drawn toward such a life. The early Church Father and theologian Tertullian (c.160–c.225) tells us that Roman society was shocked and often confused by the way Christian communities lived and practiced their faith. Romans considered Christians as misanthropes because of the way they loved those in their communities and beyond them. They said of Christians, “Behold, see, how they love one

another.” It’s the love of God that calls us into community, into the church, and it’s love that grounds, forms, and reforms God’s people to be people of that “still more excellent way,” as Paul said. (1 Cor. 12:31), which is the way of love expressed in and through the church, in the ekklesia. “Love that is patient; love that is kind; love that is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love that does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful, that does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. A love that bears all things; believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor 13:4-7).

There is an old hymn that’s not so popular anymore; although it’s still our hymnal. I remember singing it in my home church whenever we welcomed new members or when we welcomed new ministers into the Presbytery.

*Blest be the tie that binds
our hearts in Christian love.
The fellowship of kindred minds
is like to that above.[4]*

May we (re)discover this love at work within and among us this year—kindred minds, kindred hearts—and then share it with our neighbors, especially those searching for a place to belong.

Sources

- [1] Vivek H. Murthy, “Surgeon General: We Have Become a Lonely Nation. It’s Time to Fix That,” *The New York Times*, April 30, 2023.
<https://catonsvillepres.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Murthy-2023-1.pdf>
- [2] Nicholas Kristof, “We Know the Cure for Loneliness. So Why Do We Suffer?” *The New York Times*, September 6, 2023.
<https://catonsvillepres.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Kristof-2023.pdf>
- [3] David Brooks, “How America Got Mean,” *The Atlantic*, August 14, 2023.
<https://catonsvillepres.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Brooks-2023-1.pdf>
- [4] “Blest Be the Tie That Binds.” Text by John Fawcett (1782), set to the hymn tune DENNIS, written by Swiss musician Johann George Nägeli (1828), arr. by Lowell Mason (1845).