

“As One: One Mind”
Romans 12:1-8
A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

This morning’s message is part one of a two-part series I call “As One.” The theme is Christian unity, or more accurately, unity in Christ.

- This is a vital topic for us to talk about. Jesus himself wants his followers to act as one in the world. He even made this plea part of a prayer in the Gospel of John: “...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you...The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one...” (John 17:21-22).
- But one look around our world and we seem to see more disunity than unity among the disciples of Jesus. Just look up churches in Thurmont on the internet and you find at least 19 different churches listed representing 13 different denominations!¹ We certainly do not lack for choice when it comes to churches, even in a small town like ours.

Christian unity, or the lack thereof, has been the subject of jokes as well, like this one about:

...a Christian who had been stranded on a desert island by himself for many years. He is rescued one day, and his rescuers are confused to see that during the years he was lost, he built three buildings. They asked the man what they were for. He pointed to them, one by one, and explained: “That one is my house. That one is the church I go to. And that one is the church I used to go to.”²

Christian unity. Is unity just a dream, something we can aspire to but never achieve? The Apostle Paul didn’t think so. In his Letter to the church in Rome, Paul makes it clear that Christians are called to live together in the unity that God provides in Christ. Paul begins by using the language of sacrifice to describe what this life of unity requires:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Romans 12:1).

That word, “sacrifice.” When we hear it, we think about giving up something in order to get ahead or to provide for someone else, like a family member.

- A single mother gives up going to the movies and hanging out with friends to take a second job so her son can go to college. That’s a sacrifice.

But when people in Paul’s time heard that word they thought instantly of dead animals. The Jewish faith, and other religions of the time, used animal sacrifice as a way to receive forgiveness, or get in good with the gods they believed in.

While the religions of Paul’s day were intent on sacrificing animals, Paul turns this idea on its head and proposes Christians become **living** sacrifices. By this he means we are to dedicate every part of our lives to God. Everything we are; everything we think; everything we say; everything we do, all of it is to be done for, and given to, God. Paul calls this our “spiritual worship.” Another way to express this comes from Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the Bible, called *The Message*. Here is Romans 12:1 from *The Message*:

So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.

That’s what it means to offer God our spiritual worship—it is to offer our lives to God.

All of us—body, mind, and soul.

Spiritual worship means offering to God every aspect of our lives. Not just our thoughts and prayers, which are important, but also our bodies, what we do, how we act in the world. If we take our Christian faith seriously, we need to “walk the walk, not just talk the talk.” But how do we get there from here? Paul’s answer might be summarized by saying, “It’s all in your head.”

“Do not be conformed to this world,” he wrote, “but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2).

¹ Yellow Pages, <https://www.yellowpages.com/thurmont-md/churches>, accessed 6 Aug 2020.

² “A joke about unity (or lack thereof),” reddit.com, article on internet,

https://www.reddit.com/r/Christianity/comments/1j28ql/a_joke_about_unity_or_lack_thereof/, accessed 5 Aug 2020.

So, it begins with our minds, our thoughts, our patterns of thinking. These, too, are offered to God. They are, in fact, changed, transformed by God through the power of the Holy Spirit living in us. The reason for this, according to Paul, is very simple.

- We are living in the present age, the one characterized by sin and rebellion against God; this age is passing away.
- We are destined for the age to come, the one characterized by God's renewing grace; this is the age that is coming into the world through Jesus Christ.³

Because we are destined to live in this new age, we need to begin now to live and act like we are already there. The only way to accomplish this is to change our minds, to allow God to transform our ways of thinking through the power of the Holy Spirit. Elsewhere, Paul describes this as "having the mind of Christ" (Philippians 2:5).

Needless to say, this is a struggle. There are plenty of people and things trying to persuade us to remain conformed to the thinking of this world, to seek the so-called "good life" marked by wealth, power, and pleasure. All of us have experienced this kind of persuasion and temptations at one time or another. Peer pressure, for example, to do or say what everyone else is doing, even when you know what everyone else is doing is hurtful or mean-spirited toward another person. But God gives us the ability to change, even our minds, through Jesus Christ.

Craig Groeschel is the senior pastor of Life.Church and the author of several books on Christian living. In his book *Soul Detox: Clean Living in a Contaminated World*, he wrote: "Most of life's battles are won or lost in the mind."⁴

Here is a battle we much fight: We must choose to allow God to transform our minds through the grace of Jesus Christ, so that we can live together as one.

This is what God desires for God's people—that we be one as God is one. That's a hard thing to manage for the simple reason that people are different. Our differences arise from being created with different genders, races, and ways of thinking. Human beings add further distinctions, such as: social and economic status, politics, and, many other distinctions if we took the time to list them. With all these differences, we might wonder how Jesus could desire us to be and act as one.

- The answer is that we are, all of us, made in the image of God.
- No single human being can fully reflect the image of God—only Jesus Christ can do that.
- God made us with many differences to reflect the glory of God in our own unique way.
- And God did this not for us to be divided, but for us to complement each other as together, we live lives that are offered to God.

Paul illustrates this here with the example of the human body:

⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another (Romans 12:4-5).

We are all different in many ways; but we all have a role to play in the Church with the gifts God gives us. The gifts are different—they vary from person to person. And this is a good thing because it takes a wide variety of gifts operating through a different people to accomplish God's purposes in the world. But what of Christian unity? Is it possible to live and be "as one" in a world that constantly seeks to divide, to drive us into disunity?

Let me offer an important note here about unity. When we hear the word "unity," we probably think: everyone in agreement, everyone thinking, acting, believing the same thing. That's not unity, that's uniformity—everybody conforming to the same standard. Uniformity, though, squelches difference, subdues

³ Tom Wright, *The New Testament for Everyone*, Romans, part 2, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 68-69.

⁴ Craig Groeschel, *Soul Detox: Clean Living in a Contaminated Word*, quoted from goodreads.com, article on internet, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/687642-most-of-life-s-battles-are-won-or-lost-in-the>, accessed 5 Aug 2020.

distinctions, and eliminates individual expression.⁵ Unity means to work together for a common purpose. It requires harnessing our diverse and unique talents, gifts, and abilities to accomplish a larger purpose.

One way we can think about this is through team sports:

On a football team, the players have unique roles to play. The receivers have to be fast to run and catch the ball. The linemen have to be big and strong to rush or block. The quarterback has to see the entire field and make split second decisions to determine the best play. The players have different abilities, different gifts. They cannot all be the same (that would be uniformity), but they can all work toward the same goal of winning the game (and that's unity).

Paul speaks about unity in Romans 12: "we who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (12:5).

Christian unity holds in common our faith in Jesus Christ as the risen Savior. But it also counts on individual difference to express the multifaceted grace of God that is given to us by the Holy Spirit. Thinking back to the 19 different churches in 13 denominations present in Thurmont, God uses these different expressions of faith in Jesus Christ to accomplish God's purposes in the world. Let me share this quote from a commentator on this passage that really puts Christian unity into context:

"None of us can do it all. No single community can do it all, either. But God empowers each community to do all it is called to do in its context. It makes a difference to see church not as a noun but a verb, not as a place to go but as a living offering to God."⁶

And that's a change in thinking about church isn't it? We are not called to be a church in the building—although I just showed you some lovely pictures of church buildings.

We are called to be the church in the street—God's people living and acting in unity with God to make disciples of Jesus Christ, which will change the world. So, my closing thought for us today about Christian unity is this: Be a verb. Be an action word for the sake of Christ. Don't stop at "thoughts and prayers," although those are important to our faith lives too. Take what God has given you and make your life a living offering to God. Use the gifts God has given you, whatever they are, to make a kingdom difference. "...do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

And may the grace of Jesus Christ be with you in the unity of the One God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

⁵ Susan Grove Eastman, "Romans 12:1-8," in Joel B. Green, et. al., editors, *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 3, Season after Pentecost*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 755.

⁶ Frank L. Crouch, "Romans 12:1-8, Commentary," Workingpreacher.org, August 27, 2017, article on internet, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3375, accessed 5 Aug 2020.