

Christian Unity

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A Note on Unity

The purpose of this study is to explore what it means to have unity in a community of faith. The foundation of such unity is love. And the love that we foster is rooted in the love of Christ.

Unity may look different in different groups of people. Sometimes it looks like gathering for worship on a Sunday, a source of respite and hope no matter what else is going on in the life of the community. Sometimes it looks like gathering for a meal, breaking bread with old friends and new ones. Sometimes it means having a difficult conversation with someone, learning together, and leading with a listening ear.

At its core, unity is about looking out for the wellbeing of everyone. That means making individual sacrifices if it benefits the whole. And it means being open and curious while caring for one's neighbors.

As you move through the sessions of this study, remember to feel comfortable asking questions when they arise and digging deeper beyond the scope of the passages that are seen here.

It can be difficult to know exactly what God wants from us in our everyday lives. But, when those kinds of questions were asked of Jesus, his answers were simple.

“Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28b-31, NRSVUE)

Unity: Water and Life

A Study of the Encounter between Jesus and the Woman at the Well

Setup:

Provide pencils and paper and designate a scribe if desired. Note-taking can help keep track of thoughts and foster an environment of listening. Keep these notes to revisit as time allows.

Introduction

No one can ever say everything there is to say about any scriptural passage. This study is meant to guide a Sunday school session and spark further reflection and exploration.

A few notes about this story:

- It only appears in the Gospel of John.
- It is the longest recorded conversation between Jesus and any other person in John.
- The conversation crosses significant boundaries—sociological, geographical, and religious.

Historically, the Samaritan woman has faced harsh scrutiny. Because she is unnamed and has had multiple husbands, she is often labeled as promiscuous or an outcast. However, this judgment has caused us to overlook her significance in the Gospel. Let's approach this story from a place of openness and explore what it means for unity in Christ. Her role is pivotal—not because of her past, but because of how she becomes a messenger of the Good News.

The Samaritan woman remains unnamed—does this make her less important? No! Her identity as a Samaritan and a woman is central to this story. Jesus asks her for water, breaking cultural norms by speaking to her as a Jewish man and a rabbi. Jews and Samaritans typically avoided one another. Moreover, men and women did not engage in conversation in public unless they had a prior connection.

The real scandal for us might seem to be her marital history. But why does Jesus bring this up? Is it to shame her? No! It could be that Jesus uses the imagery of marriage to evoke the relationship between God and Israel or Christ and the Church. Water in this passage also carries deep symbolic meaning, representing life and renewal. Jesus' mention of her life circumstances demonstrates that he knows her fully and chooses to engage with her. The real significance lies in how she is transformed by this encounter, becoming an effective evangelist.

Remember: Jesus does not condemn her. Instead, he, a Jewish rabbi, is the most scandalous actor in this encounter, choosing to cross boundaries to reach out to her.

Let's open our hearts to see through Jesus' eyes, embracing this woman as an empowered bearer of the Good News. Together, let's consider what this story says about unity in Christ. Imagine how her community might have seen her differently after this encounter!

Opening Prayer

God, you give us the gift of your Word. Open our hearts to hear the Gospel anew this day. Give us patience with ourselves and a listening ear for our fellow disciples who are here with us in this time together. Amen.

Questions to Begin

1. How do you define unity? How does your understanding of unity shape your life as a disciple (on Sundays, at home, at work)?
2. Is unity the same as agreement? Why or why not?
3. What comes to mind when you think of the Samaritan woman at the well?

Read John 4:1-42

This is a lengthy passage, so consider printing it out and dividing it into sections. Adjust the length based on your time. Encourage participants to pay attention to words, ideas, or phrases that stand out. Write down any questions for later discussion, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide your conversation.

^{4:1}Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John” ²(although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized), ³he left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” ¹¹The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” ¹³Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” ¹⁵The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband,’ ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” ¹⁹The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

²⁷Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?”
²⁸Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,
²⁹“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.”³²But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.”³³So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?”³⁴Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.³⁵Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.³⁶The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.³⁷For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.”⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days.⁴¹And many more believed because of his word.⁴²They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Questions for Discussion

1. What stood out to you in the reading? Did any part of this passage sound different today?
2. Do you have questions that need clarification? (These can sometimes lead to tangents, so invite participants to note them for future study or have someone volunteer to research them.)
3. If you could ask Jesus about the Samaritan woman, what do you think he would say?

Reflecting on Unity:

4. Revisit your definitions of unity. Has this discussion or the biblical passage added new layers to your understanding?
5. What does unity look like in our context today? How do you approach conversations with people who are different from you? Are there groups you’ve generalized or judged?
6. How can we strive to see others through Jesus’ eyes, seeking deeper understanding?

Reflecting on Peace and Unity:

7. How is peace different from unity? How are both essential in our life of discipleship?

Note: As you wrap up the discussion, take note of any further questions to revisit in the next session. Hold onto your notes on the definition of unity for ongoing reflection.

Closing Prayer

Dear God, you have made us in your image. We are wonderfully different and uniquely gifted. Hold us in your care as we see your brilliance in one another. Help us to see the ways we are called to be your body in the world. We thank you for the ways we walk together and for the ways we know you are with us. Amen.

Unity: Diversity & Community in the Body of Christ

A Study of Paul’s Image of the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians

Setup: Provide pencils and paper, and designate a scribe if desired. Note-taking can help keep track of thoughts and foster an environment of listening. Keep these notes to revisit as time allows.

Introduction

This study focuses on Paul’s metaphor of the Church as the Body of Christ. Paul addresses a community in Corinth struggling with division, reminding them that every member has a unique role and is essential to the life of the Church. Let us explore what this means for us today, as we consider the richness of diversity within the body of believers and how we live out unity in Christ.

The Corinthian church faced many challenges. Corinth was a diverse city—a crossroads of trade and culture in the Roman Empire. This diversity brought both richness and tension into the church. Disputes over social status, spiritual gifts, and practices led to divisions among the believers.

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians addresses these issues, urging unity. He uses the metaphor of the body to illustrate how different members, with diverse gifts and roles, are all integral to the community of believers. Unity does not mean uniformity; rather, it is about recognizing and valuing the contributions of each person.

Opening Prayer

God of many gifts, you call us to be your Church. Open our minds and hearts as we explore your Word together. Help us to see the ways you weave us together, and the beauty in each unique part of your Body. Amen.

Questions to Begin

1. When you hear the term “Body of Christ,” what comes to mind?
2. How do you understand the idea of unity in a diverse community?
3. Can you think of a time when you felt especially valued for your unique gifts in the church? Or a time when you felt your gifts were overlooked?

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Invite participants to listen closely to the imagery Paul uses and to note any words or phrases that resonate with them. Write down any initial questions or reflections. You may want to divide the reading into smaller sections for clarity.

“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.”

“Now if the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?” (1 Corinthians 12:12-27, NRSVUE)

Questions for Discussion

1. What images or phrases stood out to you in this passage? Why?
2. Paul describes the Church as a body made up of many parts. What do you think he is trying to communicate to the Corinthians—and to us?
3. How does this passage challenge the way we view differences in our congregation or community?

Reflecting on the Metaphor:

4. What might it look like for our church to live as the Body of Christ today?
5. In what ways does our congregation celebrate the diversity of gifts, backgrounds, and experiences among its members?
6. Are there times when we struggle to honor the contributions of each part of the body? Why might this be?

Deeper Reflection on Unity in Diversity:

7. Paul emphasizes that every part of the body is needed and valuable. Think about the gifts you see in those around you. Are there gifts you’ve noticed that others might overlook?
8. Consider the ways society often values some roles over others. How does this passage challenge those attitudes within the church?
9. How do we balance the need for unity in our mission with the diverse perspectives and experiences within the community?

Connections to Baptism:

10. Paul writes that we were all baptized into one body by the Holy Spirit, regardless of background or status. How does our baptism shape our sense of belonging within the Church?
11. How does baptism connect us not only to Christ but also to one another?

Note: As you close the discussion, take note of any questions or ideas that could be explored further next week. Save your notes on how the group has understood the concept of the Body of Christ.

Closing Prayer

God of unity and diversity, thank you for the many gifts you have given to each of us. Help us to see the value in one another, to embrace the different ways we serve, and to work together as your hands and feet in this world. As we go from this place, keep us mindful that we are one body in you. Amen.

Additional Texts for Study (Optional):

Romans 12:4-8: Paul’s reflection on the diversity of gifts within the Church.

Ephesians 4:1-6: A call to live in unity, recognizing the one body and one Spirit.

Unity: A Rush of Wind and Tongues of Fire A Study of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2

Setup: Provide pencils and paper, and designate a scribe if desired. Note-taking can help keep track of thoughts and foster an environment of listening. Keep these notes to revisit as time allows.

Introduction to Acts

The Book of Acts is full of stories about the followers of Jesus after Jesus had been crucified, died, risen from the dead after three days, and ascended into heaven. It is actually a sort of sequel to the Gospel of Luke, known to have been organized by the same author. This is obvious when one compares the first few sentences of both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts.

Luke 1: "Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I, too, decided, as one having a grasp of everything from the start, to write a well-ordered account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may have a firm grasp of the words in which you have been instructed."

Acts 1: "In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This,' he said, 'is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'"

Throughout the sequence of stories in Acts, we follow well-known characters like Peter, Paul, and other disciples as they try to live out the lives for which Jesus prepared them. There were so many emotions surrounding the days immediately following Jesus' departure from the earth. They'd just ridden a roller coaster of grief, anger, fear, confusion, and overwhelming joy during Jesus' days of death and resurrection. They'd grown accustomed to following, but now they had to be proactive. They'd been thrust into positions of leadership and decision-making. What was this community going to look like and what were they supposed to be doing now that Jesus had moved on?

As the first sentences of Acts confirm, Jesus promised that he was not leaving his followers alone, but that he was sending the Holy Spirit to them. The stories, then, are examples of what a life led and filled by the Holy Spirit look like.

This is such an interesting book of the Bible because it is so far removed from some of our contemporary lives of faith. The adventures and miracles that we read about are like nothing we've seen with our own eyes. But at the same time, it resonates so clearly with some of the decisions we're making as communities of faith.

We, too, are constantly asking questions like, “What should we be doing? What are our gifts, and how can we utilize them to make the world better? Where is God calling us to go? What problems can we solve with the resources we have? What is different about the world that we live in and the world that God wants for us?”

Perhaps, then, we can learn something about unity, grace, and love from the stories in the Book of Acts. In the very least, we can open ourselves up to being surprised by the Holy Spirit and how it guides and nudges us along the way.

Opening Prayer

God of love and grace, give us the curiosity and compassion we need to enter explore your Word now together. Rooted in love, inspire us to use what we learn today to make your world a better place. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Questions to Begin

1. Have you ever read the Book of Acts all the way through? What did you think? If you haven't, take a few minutes to flip through the pages and read some of the headings.
2. What do you think were some of the biggest issues facing the first communities of faith after Jesus' ascension?
3. What are some of the biggest issues facing your community of faith today?
4. How do you experience the Holy Spirit in your life? How do you try to notice where the Holy Spirit is present or active in your life or in the world around you?

Read Acts 2, Pt. 1

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

“Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.’ All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’” (Acts 2:1-13)

Questions for Discussion

1. Does your congregation do anything special to celebrate the festival of Pentecost during the liturgical year? If so, what? If not, what sorts of creative things can you think of for telling this story each year?
2. The author of Acts goes through a list of different groups of people who were present that day: *“Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.”* What kinds of distinctions can you think about in your own society that you could add to a list like this?
3. Have you ever been in an environment where the primary language was not your own? What did it feel like? How did you try to communicate or follow along?
4. The lack of language barrier between the different groups of people gathered there is the miracle of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit created a sense of unity that was totally unexpected and seemed impossible. Have you ever been surprised by a sense of unity or “common ground” with someone or a group of people that you didn’t expect to connect with? What was that like?

The Wind and the Breath of the Holy Spirit

When we wake up in the morning each day, we probably don’t expect to encounter the Holy Spirit in such a dramatic way as the crowd gathered in Acts 2. But we are likely no stranger to the belief that the Spirit is moving and acting in and around us. If our experiences aren’t as loud and violent or full of fire as this story, then what is it like?

In the original biblical rhetoric, the imagery around God’s Spirit was often likened to wind and breath. The Spirit was like a rush of wind: it moved around invisibly and often unpredictably; you might be able to catch a glimpse of it like a rustling in the leaves; it was all-encompassing, but at the same time it was direct and specific. It was also like a breath of fresh air: you could breathe it in and feel it in your body; it was just as crucial to your life and survival as oxygen in your lungs; it was rhythmic, steady, and ever-present.

These kinds of understandings of the Holy Spirit are helpful as we try to understand how our stories might line up with the stories we read in the Book of Acts. Once we believe and expect the Spirit to be so integral to our lives of faith, we may be more amenable to what it’s doing and where it’s calling us to go.

Read Acts 2, Pt. 2

“Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:43-47, NRSVUE)

Questions for Discussion

1. Once the crowds had received the gift of the Holy Spirit, how did they respond? What did their communities look like? What values rose to the surface as they settled into life together?
2. Does it seem possible for us to live in communities like the one described here? Why or why not?
3. It is clear that the Holy Spirit oriented individuals to be outwardly focused. The Spirit did not only make their lives better as individuals, but it pointed them towards communal wellbeing. Besides yourself, who are the other people in your life whose wellbeing is of your concern?
4. What is a real world example of a community that looks after one another like this one?

Note: As you wrap up the discussion, take note of any further questions to revisit in the next session. Hold onto your notes on the definition of unity for ongoing reflection.

What Does This Mean for Us Today?

You've already discussed whether or not it is realistic that we could shape our own communities after one like this. While that conversation may have resulted in a few ways in which this passage does or does not act as a model society for us - it is clear that we can learn something from these very first communities of faith.

The Holy Spirit has moved these people to live in a way that benefited everyone around them. They're sharing resources and space. They are likely making sacrifices in order to take care of others in their family and friendship groups, probably even strangers. They are understanding any individual struggle to be the concern of the entire community.

It can be easy for us to lose sight of these things in our own lives. It is a human instinct for us to ensure our own survival. Subsequently, it is natural for us to protect and support those in our immediate circles of connection. Jesus, though, taught his followers to expand that reach of care and compassion to anyone they met. And if Jesus had lived during a time of such global communication and awareness, he would have challenged his followers to extend their conscious efforts worldwide.

This can be quite overwhelming. Whenever you are reading this study, there is no doubt that there are countless stories in the news about natural disasters, wars, and diseases ravaging through God's creation. We can get lost trying to do something about all of the things that are causing pain and suffering in this world. And when that's the case, it's easier to freeze up than to search for a solution.

What this story of Pentecost and Spirit-led community shows us, though, is that we are connected to one another. Nothing separates us from our bond as children of God - not language, not geographical distance, not social constructs and hierarchies. We are called to live in unity with one another, and to remain attentive to the needs of others in our lives. And Jesus always urged us to be especially attentive to those who were more often ignored or disregarded by most.

The same Spirit that is flowing in Acts 2 is blowing through the breeze in our lives as well. What is it calling you to do for your neighbors today?

Closing Prayer

Holy God, we ask that you fill our lives and our communities with your Spirit. Give us the courage we need to open our eyes and our hearts to the work that the Spirit is doing in and around us. And empower us with hope for a world built on unity. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Unity: “No Longer Jew or Greek...”
A Study of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians

Setup: Provide pencils and paper, and designate a scribe if desired. Note-taking can help keep track of thoughts and foster an environment of listening. Keep these notes to revisit as time allows.

Introduction to Galatians

This book of the Bible is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to an existing community of faith in Galatia. Paul’s letters (usually referred to as epistles) address a specific group of people at a specific point in time. It’s important to know this when we read it because it helps us to understand that the content of the letter is contextual. Biblical scholars often remind readers that when we read these passages it is as if we are “reading someone else’s mail”. Groups receiving Paul’s letters would usually read them aloud together as a group at one of their regular meetings.

In this letter, Paul begins by telling his audience why he is writing to them:

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God’s curse! Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.” (Galatians 1:6-10, NRSVUE)

Paul is worried that the churches in Galatia have been distracted or even corrupted by people who are straying from what he believes is the God-given gospel.

Biblical scholars have determined that the Christian converts in Galatia were primarily Gentiles - that is, they were not coming from a background rooted in the Jewish faith. That means that most of them had not spent their lives immersed in Jewish laws and other standards. This is not something that gave Paul any pause. However, these other teachers were apparently trying to convince the Galatians that they were somehow lacking because they had not observed certain rituals such as circumcision.*

Read Paul’s argument here:

“But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the gentiles to live like Jews?’ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not gentile sinners, yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it

is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.” (Galatians 2:14-21, NRSVUE)

In his letter, Paul is not condemning anyone who lives by the Jewish law even as they have begun to follow Jesus in their lives as Christians. And it is important for us not to fall into a spiral of saying that Jesus has somehow replaced or nullified the Jewish faith and identity altogether. This way of thinking is often referred to as “supersessionism” and it is inherently antisemitic. Paul is, however, condemning the judgment and shame that has caused the Galatians to believe that they need to do anything to earn God’s grace.

** Resource used: The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume 9: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes (1998)*

Opening Prayer

God of love, break down our preconceptions about one another. Open our ears to listen. Open our hands to serve. And open our hearts to be humble and empathetic. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Questions to Begin

1. Paul tells his audience that they will not be justified by their actions or by “works of the law”. Instead, God’s grace is freely given, and that’s the good news upon which Christians should plant their faith. What does that mean to you?
2. Have you ever felt pressure in your faith community to act a certain way? Does it feel as though you’re being held to a certain standard? What did that feel like?
3. Paul’s argument seems to be that “unity” in a community of faith should be centered around a foundation of divine love and affirmation. Is that something that resonates with you? Where have you seen that to be true in your own community?

Read Galatians 3:26-28

Paul continues to expand on his thoughts about laws and Jewish heritage. He tries to build an argument that God shows no preference to anyone whose individual life or genealogical lineage has rooted them in a community faith longer than anyone else. You might compare this to the reality that God is no more gracious towards a charter member of a congregation who has been integrated into its history and worship patterns for decades longer than a new member still trying to get used to how to follow along with the liturgy in the bulletin.

Eventually he lands on this beautiful set of sentences regarding one’s identity and sense of faith:

“For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:26-28, NRSVUE)

Paul, once again, dissolves any distinctions between people of faith. While we might get caught up on certain labels that we have placed on one another, lists of achievements, social hierarchies, or anything else - what matters to God is that we know that we are precious in God's eyes.

Questions for Discussion

1. Paul calls all people of faith "children of God". This is not a term of endearment reserved for a subset of people, but it is something for all of us. What does it mean to you to be a child of God?
2. The labels that Paul addresses are contextually specific: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. What are some of the labels that exist in our society in order to separate each other into categories?
3. The reality is that we do not live in a world without labels or distinctions or power structures. But what would it look like if we lived according to Paul's vision for the world? What would it look like for us to get rid of the labels you just discussed?
4. Can you think of a time that you stepped over a social boundary in order to engage with someone different? Or can you think of a time that someone took a risk to do that with you? What did it feel like?

What Does It Mean for Us Today?

It is obvious that division is something that we still contend with in our contemporary communities. We build up walls to separate us from others with regards to wealth, politics, race, gender, religion, physical ability, sexuality, etc. If we allow for Paul's words to linger in our minds and in our hearts, then perhaps we can muster up the courage we need to knock those walls down. What does that look like?

1. Creed or Compass for Our Lives

There is evidence that this rhetoric from Paul is not merely a paragraph in his letter to the Galatians, but that it is a fundamental creed from the early churches.* Think about the creeds we use in our own worship routines. They are full of foundational beliefs that shape the rest of the ways that we live out our lives of faith.

Perhaps we, too, could subscribe to a creed like this one. Perhaps we could put these universal truths about our relationship with God and relationship with one another alongside the other cornerstone beliefs we have (e.g. "I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord...", "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins...").

A community that is formed around such a structure of unity is surely one that is guided by things like divine love and grace.

**Resource used: The Forgotten Creed by Stephen J. Patterson (2018)*

2. A Theology of Baptism

We've spent some time discussing what it means to be a child of God. We most often hear this kind of language in the Lutheran Church when we are reciting from our baptismal liturgies. It is at baptism that we audibly hear and assure ourselves that we are indeed children of God. And the gifts of baptism are not something that are earned or held hostage. Instead, they are freely given to anyone who believes that they are true.

What does it mean to be a child of God? In Martin Luther's Small Catechism he writes, "[Baptism] brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the words and promise of God declare." Even baptism itself is not a prerequisite for these benefits. It is an act that signifies to God, the community around us, and our very selves that we believe God's promises and presence are real and true.

In many Lutheran congregations, it is most common for infants and children to be baptized. This clearly portrays a dependence on God's grace and love. A baby is totally dependent on others for its survival. But older adolescent and adult baptisms are just as appropriate. Again, Luther writes in his Small Catechism, "It signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

Baptism, then, removes us from any sort of separation from God, and it orients us toward God's purpose for our lives. It removes any barriers that have been placed upon us or around us that have kept us at an arm's length from God. And it fills us with a spirit of unity toward the people around us so that we can share that same immersion of grace.

3. Fruit of the Spirit

Once Paul has successfully reassured the Christian community in Galatia that they are all children of God, he expands on what that might mean for them. He says that the gift of the Holy Spirit is realized in the lives of all of God's children, and that their lives are noticeably changed by its presence.

Anyone who is filled with the Holy Spirit has a new outlook on life. Paul says that a life that ignores the Spirit is dull, sinful, and worthless. A life that embraces the Spirit is full of energy and purpose.

"Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

"By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another." (Galatians 5:16-26, NRSVUE)

Questions for Discussion

1. It is likely very easy to come up with a list of labels or distinctions we'd use to identify ourselves (e.g. things we find on a driver's license or a diploma). What are some words you'd use to explain your identity as a child of God?
2. Paul's argument reassures us that we are children of God. But it also makes the point that everyone around us is a child of God as well. How does it feel to view others as children of God? What does that say about people that we don't necessarily like or respect?
3. What does unity look like in a world where Paul's words ring true?

Note: As you wrap up the discussion, take note of any further questions to revisit in the next session. Hold onto your notes on the definition of unity for ongoing reflection.

Closing Prayer

Holy God, you have called us your own. Empower us now to go into your world with confidence that we are your children. And help us to lead with love and hospitality in our relationships with others. Fire up your gifts within us, and give us the courage we need to use them for the benefit of your whole creation. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Youth Activities for Christian Unity

Adapted by Deacon Deborah Poole
Coordinator of Children, Youth, and Family Ministry

Unity Scavenger Hunt

Prior to the lesson, hide pieces of a puzzle around the building. Make sure to hide these pieces in very difficult places that would require the youth to work together to find them.

Say: Today's game is a challenge. There are pieces of a puzzle hidden throughout _____. (Share the area where the pieces are hidden.) You could try to find pieces all on your own, but I will save you the trouble by saying that you will need to find these pieces as a team. There are ___ pieces and the game is over only when all of those pieces are found.

When all of the pieces are found, reflect with the group on these questions:

- Which pieces did you need someone else to help you find them?
- Do you prefer to do things by yourself or with others help? Why?
- What are the challenges in doing things together?

Object Lesson

You will need a stack of heavy, hard-backed books. Put youth into small groups.

Say: Maybe you noticed that I placed a stack of books here – they aren't for us to read. Choose one person in your group for the object lesson, preferably the smallest person – able to hold a stack of books. I am going to place a book on top of your head, and then I want you to tell me if it feels heavy.

Wait for a response.

Okay. Now, I'm going to keep adding books until you tell me it's too heavy.

Stack books until it's too heavy for them to hold. At this point, choose someone else to help the first person.

Let's try this again. I want each of you to hold one end of this book. Now, I'm going to keep stacking them. Use the same number of books as before. Does this feel unbelievably heavy?

To the first person that was holding books: Are the books heavier or lighter this time?

Of course, they feel lighter. These books help us understand how important it is that we have each other. Each of us carries burdens that are made lighter when we have other people that pray for us and help us in times of need. We were never meant to go through life on our own. God created us to live in community with each other. Have you ever noticed that "unity" is part of the word "community"?

Group Activity

This game can be played two different ways: in teams or as individuals.

As teams of two: Give one person a popsicle stick.

As individuals: Give each person a popsicle stick.

Dump the marshmallows into a bowl and set it in a place that can be reached by everyone.

You can set a timer for the game and see who has the most marshmallows on their stick when time is up.

Or... you can just keep stacking marshmallows and see who is the last to drop their marshmallows.

Say: Today, we will be talking about “unity” and how our love for God brings us together.

So, I thought it would be fun if we played a quick game to get us started and we can see if it brings us together.

Go ahead and put the end of the popsicle stick in your mouth.

When I say GO, you’re going to stack as many marshmallows as you possibly can on your popsicle stick.

If any marshmallows fall off, then you are out of the game.

The last person to have marshmallows remaining on their popsicle stick wins.

Play as many rounds of the game as you would like. After the game, ask... Were you happy or upset with who won the game?

Is it easy for you to be happy for others when they do well, and you don’t? What would happen if instead of being jealous of each other, we could celebrate each other’s successes?

Body of Christ

1. Draw outlines of body parts on construction paper.
2. Write out positive spiritual gifts, attributes, or verses on each body part. Decorate as desired, adding eyes and mouth to the face if wished.
3. Cut out each body part.
4. Assemble the parts together, securing with brad fasteners to make the body parts moveable.

Spiritual Gifts - Act it out

Have them make up a skit or charade to illustrate how each spiritual gift might be expressed, then have the rest of the class guess which one they are acting out.

Fruit of the Spirit - Social media

Have them create a visual meme (an image with a word or phrase) for each fruit of the spirit. They can then post these (don’t forget there are lots of fruit emojis!). Ask them as a group to come up with useful hashtags.