

# “Unity”

*Psalm 133:1, Philippians 2:1-11, Colossians 1:18-20 & Galatians 3:28*

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**PRAYER FOR UNDERSTANDING** Gracious God as the world gathers around tables to eat and drink today, remind us that we come to your table with our extended family, siblings of every nation and race. Bless that global table with your peace. Nourish us with your word, your presence, so we can all be gathered up together in your love enjoying harmony with all. Amen

The psalmist sings: **Psalm 133:1 NLT “How wonderful and pleasant it is when people live together in harmony!”**

The Apostle Paul wrote extensively on the importance of unity, community, and harmony. Paul proclaims the importance of diversity and unity by explaining that all people belong to one body and each person has a distinct role. Everyone functioning together is of utmost importance. Paul wrote these radical, world changing words. **Galatians 3:28 NLT “There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.”** Our familiarity with these words diminishes our understanding of this revolutionary command. Jew and Greek are each distinct and equal, one in God. No religion, no group of people, no culture, is any more chosen than another, all are equally loved by God, all are redeemed by God’s grace. Living in harmony with all people fulfills the ancient covenant. God blesses each individual, so they can bless all people. God blesses each country, so they can bless all countries. Today, Paul might write there is no longer Islam and Christian all are one in Jesus.

Slave and free are each distinct and equal, one in God. No matter one’s wealth, education, employment, or status, all people are equal. CEOs and homeless are equal and one in God. Citizen and immigrant are equal and one in God.

Male and female are distinct and equal, one in God. When Paul wrote this originally, it was life changing because women were considered the property of men. Women were controlled by men. Paul declares they are equal disrupting religion, law, government, and social expectations. Women and men were and are created equal by God. A sign of a broken and fallen world is many men do not treat women as equals.

Sometimes scripture has words that people do not realize their radical intent for generations. Sometimes even the author did not perceive their wisdom for future generations. Today, many Christians would say each person is created distinct in gender, no two people have the same gender. Gender is a spectrum. There are a full range of genders, much more than only two options made up long ago by patriarchs. No matter where one is on the gender spectrum, all are equal and each is to be valued for the ways God made them unique. God is glorified when a person is authentic to the way God created them. Each person is distinct, all are equal, and all are one in God.

A sin many struggle with is categorizing people, dividing people, putting people in boxes, and then comparing and judging. Imagine the glory of our coming future where everyone lives in harmony, each person appreciated for their individuality, all people fully loving everyone, each person valued as an equal, no one trying to change another person to be like them, world peace, all united as one worldwide community. Each of us is commanded to make that vision a reality.

Philippians, like all the Apostle Paul’s letters, has a section instructing us to live in harmony with everyone. **Philippians 2:1-11 NLT “Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from God’s love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? Then make my joy complete, be of the same mind, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. Do not be selfish; do not try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Do not look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though Jesus was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, Jesus gave up his divine privileges; Jesus took the humble position of a servant and was born as a human being. When Jesus appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross. Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Parent of all.”**

Jesus self-emptied to be equal with you, one with you. Jesus self-emptied to be equal with everyone, one with everyone. Jesus self-emptied to bring all people together. Jesus self-emptied to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth, to start the grace redeeming process of merging earth with the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus gave up divine status to be our sibling, elevating us all to the glory of a chosen person in God’s eternal realm of every growing joyful love.

Visually, think of this like a V. At the top is God, the Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. God the Redeemer goes down the V by self-emptying, giving up, all the glory and perks of being God, who is all powerful, all wise, all knowing, all love, all joy, all peace. God the Redeemer goes further down the V by taking on human flesh. Jesus becomes our sibling. Jesus

keeps going down the V to be united with the most despised, outcast, sinful, lowest person on earth. Jesus keeps going down the V by being betrayed, crucified, and dying a human death. Jesus goes down the V to the bottom of hell, to those who do not sense the love of God, to those who have lost everyone and everything, to those who cannot fathom the glory of all people being united in harmony, rejoicing in shared love. Jesus brings everyone up the other side of the V. Each and every person is elevated by God's grace to the glory of heaven. We live in an already and not yet time. Jesus has been elevated back to the glory of being fully God. We are in the process of being elevated to the glory of the Kingdom of Heaven, a realm where all are united in love. There is no end to anyone's story. No one is abandoned in the bottom of the V. Separation, loss, and death are all temporary, for Jesus brings us all up the other side of the V to glorious, resurrection, abundant, eternal life. One day the full glory of the Kingdom of Heaven will break upon each of us like the rising sun.

Ben Witherington writes: "It would not have been shocking to Greeks to hear that their God had chosen to take on human form. They had heard such stories about Zeus and Hermes, among others. But to be told that their God had chosen to become a servant among humans — that was a very different story, a shocking story, because it deconstructed everything they thought was written in stone about the hierarchical nature of reality and relationships and about all their honor and shame codes."

It is helpful to put today's scripture in context. Paul writes: "I urge Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." Then, Paul asks their fellow church members to please help them reconcile and live in peaceful harmony. Their conflict was heavy on Paul's mind as he penned this brief letter to the Philippians. One feature of long-term conflict is that it becomes difficult for adversaries to treat their opponents with mercy. Our human comparisons, conflict, fear, and anger need God's mercy to create unity. Paul advises us to let go of our desire to get our way in conflict, let go of our desire to control others, let go of our desire to elevate self above another, let go of our desire to make others like our self, let go of our tendency to spend most of our time with those who think and behave like us, let go of forming tribes. Let go. Empty yourself like Jesus emptied self to be our equal, to serve us. Let come God's mercy. Find the path of mercy, so God can help you reconcile and live in harmony.

Anne Lamott said: "Mercy is radical kindness. Mercy means offering or being offered aid in desperate straits. Mercy is not deserved. It involves absolving the unabsolvable, forgiving the unforgivable. Mercy brings us to the miracle of apology, given and accepted, to unashamed humility when we have erred or forgotten."

Mercy is the poetry of life. Mercy is a tractor beam, a mysterious energy, that draws us all together.

Martha Moore-Keish wrote: "Paul calls the church to imitate Christ's self-emptying. For a church of power and privilege, even one that is waning in public influence, the call to self-emptying may in fact be liberating. Rather than grasping after (or mourning the loss of) worldly power, the church might hear in these words a call to give up trying to be "like God" and instead willingly assume the role of servant. This means identifying completely with human suffering and marginalization — even to the point of death. The church is not called to be "like God," if that means having power over the world. Rather, the church is called to be like Jesus, who gave up power and privilege to be in the midst of the suffering world. We can respond to this self-emptying call, trusting that in Christ, we will also be exalted on the far side of death. The promise of exaltation, then, comes as a gift of utter grace at the hand of God. For any church struggling with its own survival today, this invitation to the life of self-emptying may be good news indeed."

At a recent Presbytery meeting a person asked, "Why are we as an institutional church afraid of loss and death? If we truly believe in resurrection, then we should believe that there will be future life for the church even if the institutional church dies. Perhaps all the ugliness of the institutional church needs to die so a life-giving universal church that welcomes all can be resurrected."

Today is world communion Sunday, a celebration of the coming Kingdom of God where all is in harmony, all people are in harmony with each other, all people are in harmony with God, all people are in harmony with the cosmos. The Apostle Paul put it this way: **Colossians 1:18-20 MSG "Jesus was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—Jesus is supreme in the end. From beginning to end Jesus is there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is Jesus, so expansive, that everything of God finds its proper place in Jesus without crowding. All the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies."**

We celebrate world communion with all people: our sibling Jesus; our presbyterian siblings; our siblings in other denominations with a variety of distinct views of this sacrament and all believe in the gracious love proclaimed through this sacrament; our siblings in other faiths; our siblings with no belief in God, for all people eat and drink; therefore all celebrate a form of this practice of eating and drinking, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet where all feast together, all are equal, all belong, all have a place set at the feast by God, all are one. This common practice of eating and drinking is a mystery in which God nourishes everyone, a mystery of holy communion uniting all. Amen