

1 Corinthians 3:1-9 N.T. Page 156 (NRSV)

¹And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? ⁴For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human?

⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. ⁹For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.

1 Corinthians 3:1-9 N.T. Page 156
“Unified”

Opening Prayer: Please bow with me in prayer. Almighty God, we are many different people, who share a common Lord. Speak to us today and bind our hearts and minds together with your love. Make us one people, your people, **Amen.**

Introduction: We’re gathered here this morning as a congregation that’s part of **the United Methodist Church** which is a worldwide connection of Christians that’s been around since 1784. And we’re gathered here as Pennsylvanians who were one of the original founding colonies of **the United States of America** back in 1776. And we’re gathered here as Americans who have been part of **the United Nations** since its founding in 1945 right after World War II ended. **Each of those organizations**, have the name United in their names. **The United** Methodist Church. *The United States of America. The United Nations.*

Oh, and there’s one more thing we’re part of. **As citizens** of planet earth, we’re one of the founding members of *The United Federation of Planets*. The United Federation of Planets is an installer alliance of more than 150 planetary governments spread out over 8,000 light years formed in the year 2161. See how easy it is to blur the lines between fact and fiction. *The United Federation of Planets* is of course a fictitious organization from *Star Trek*, the science fiction series created by Gene Roddenberry which debuted on TV back in 1966.

What makes *The United Federation of Planets* sound plausible is its adherence to a longstanding ideal. *“For united we stand, divided we fall, and if our backs should ever be against the wall, we’ll be together, together, you and I.”* We like the ideal of being “united.” But the ideal and the reality never really seem to match. **Sooner or later** our very real differences raise their ugly heads and divide us. **Unity is only** as strong as what unites us.

PAUSE

Move I.

Our differences are glaringly obvious. Some of us have brown eyes, others of us have blue eyes. **Some of us** went to college others of us didn't finish high school. **Some of us** like were born in Erie, others of us were born someplace else. **Some of us** have money put away for retirement, others of us don't have enough money to pay this month's rent. **Some of us** have grandparents who were members of this church; others of us have grandparents who were never members of any church. **Some of us** have been Christians for much our lives, others of us have only known Christ for a short while. **Some of these** differences are petty, others are substantial. But one thing is certain, we all have differences.

Our Bible lesson today is from the Apostle Paul's letter to the fledgling Christians in Corinth. **The people of Corinth** were a very curious people. **They liked** learning about things and we're great students of philosophy. **But as they** began to figure a few things out the next thing you knew they began to think of themselves as know-it-alls. Their learning began to go to their heads and stood in the way of them getting to know God. **But of course**, knowing God is actually the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10).

In today's Bible lesson Paul is confronting a problem; I'll call it religious one-upmanship. **Some in the church** in Corinth had come to faith as the result of Paul's preaching while others had come to faith as the result of Apollos' teaching. I know this all sounds silly to us today. **It would be like** some people saying they had come to faith at a Billy Graham crusade, **while others** came to faith because of some Sunday school teacher no one ever heard of. It was a petty difference, **but the people in the church in Corinth** were blowing it all out of proportion. They had divided themselves into two camps. **Abraham Lincoln** quoting Jesus once warned, "**A house divided against itself cannot stand**" (Matthew 12:25b). The petty has become serious.

What are some of our obvious differences? What are some of the differences between the people who gather here in worship each week? **Well, our most obvious difference** is that we worship in two different styles. This of course is nothing new for us, we have worshiped in two styles for going on four years now. Some of our people prefer hymns while others prefer praises and worship music. To my knowledge we're the only church in City of Erie that does this. **St. Paul's Episcopal** offers just traditional worship, and **New Life in the Spirit** offers just contemporary worship. **And of course, Harvest Family Church** worships here in our building and they worship in a distinctly African style. **But as is so often the case** for us United Methodist, as a church, we're perfectly comfortable with both styles. In fact, there are many of us who worship in both styles every week. I for one will always defend the virtues of each.

Now, by-in-large our people are perfectly content to let others in our church worship in the style that best resonates with them. They let the petty remain petty. **They don't turn a mole hill into a mountain.** But there are always a few people who like to grip and complain. **As far as they're concerned** the only right way to worship is their way. Their style of worship is superior, and the other style is inferior. Of course, they never say "inferior," but they think it. To them the other style is either "*dry or boring*" or it's "*loud and sacrilege.*" They make the petty serious. **They turn the mole hill into the mountain.** If that describes you, **then what Paul's saying** to the factions at the church in Corinth, he's saying to you. Mirroring 1 Corinthians 3:5, "*After all, what is traditional worship? What is contemporary worship? Only servants, through whom you worship God each week.*" We are all very different people. **Yes, our differences are glaringly obvious.**

End I.

Move II.

But God holds everything together. In a constantly expanding universe, you'd expect everything to fly apart. **With the earth spinning** more than 1,000 mph at the equator and about 750 mph at mid-latitudes you would expect everything to fly off. Or at least you'd expect you'd get blown over. But we don't even notice the spinning. **God not only created** everything in the first place; God maintains the delicate balance required to keep it all together.

This brings to mind the words of the old African American spiritual, "*He's Got the Whole World in His Hands.*" Let's sing this together. O, and you can clap if you want:

**He's got the whole world in His hands;
He's got the whole world in His hands;
God's got the whole world in His hands;
He's got the whole world in His hands.**

**He's got the earth and the sky in his hands;
He's got the night and the day in his hands;
He's got the sun and the moon in his hands;
He's got the whole world in His hands.**

That song might be simple, but the theology behind it is powerful. God didn't just create the universe; God is also constantly working to keep the universe in motion. **In Hebrews 1:3 (NRSV) we read "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word."** God the father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are collectively engaged in maintaining the universe and sustaining all life.

One of the reasons music is so important to worship is that it engraves the truths of God within the recesses of our minds. That's what makes that old African American spiritual so powerful. *God's got the whole world in his hands.*

But of course, it's not just old songs that do that, new songs do that too. **This is Charlie Hall** from Oklahoma City. Hall's trademark is his very long goatee which flows down past the center of his chest. Charlie Hall has been writing and performing praise and worship music for more than 20 years now and he has released more than three dozen albums. He has collaborated with other contemporary Christian music artist such as Chris Tomlin, Louis Giglio, Christie Nockels, **and Matt Redman**. One of his songs that he wrote along with Matt Redman that we have sung in our "*Light for the City*" worship service is "**Center**," written in 2006. Listen as I read the words:

**You're the center of the universe
Everything was made in You Jesus
Breath of every living thing
Everyone was made for You.**

**You hold everything together,
You hold everything together.**

**Christ be the center of our lives
Be the place we fix our eyes.
Be the center of our lives.**

Did you hear that? "*Christ holds everything together.*" That's deep theology. That's theology worth remembering. **In Colossians 1:17 (NRSV)** we read, "**Christ is before all things, and in him all things hold together.**" That's why as Christians we make Christ the center of our lives. We need God's help to hold it together. We are all such different people. **But God really does hold everything together.**

End II.

Move III.

And Christ comes to unify us with God. When we say God holds everything together, we don't just mean everything in the created universe, **we mean absolutely everything**, and that includes everything in the heavens above. **That of course is the crux** of the human condition. Although God gives us life, and God sustains our life, we can't see God. On our own, **we lead splintered lives** apart from God. Creation all around us points to our creator, **but we can't** see his face, we can't hear his voice, we can't touch his hand without some supernatural help. That is another verse from elsewhere in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. **"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"** (1 Corinthians 2:9). **We need a revelation**, and not just any kind of revelation, **but a special revelation** to introduce us to, and connect us with, God. And that special revelation takes the form of the **God's Word**, the Bible, and **God's Son**, the word become flesh, Jesus Christ.

I remember when I was in seminary and was taking my first theology class. It was a pretty intimidating. The professors had PhDs in theology and lots of the other students had studied Bible for their undergraduate degrees. **And there I sat** with my engineering degree. *I felt like a fish out of water.* **Dr. John Burgess**, and **Dr. Susan Nelson** co-taught that theology class appropriately called, "*Introduction to Systematic Theology*." I've mentioned **Dr. Nelson before**, she was a liberal feminist theologian who most students, especially male students, dreaded. But on the first day of class, I stopped by her office and we reached an understanding. I didn't have to agree with her; I just had to clearly explain what I believed. Much to the other students' surprise, Dr. Nelson ended up being my favorite teacher. I learned a lot from her. **Tragically**, Dr. Nelson died of brain cancer on November 4, 2010, five years after I graduated.

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Anyway, I remember during our first group discussion session for that theology class that Dr. Nelson ask me what something meant theologically. I responded, “*Hey I’m not a theologian, I’m just a lay person.*” And she quipped back, “*We’re all theologians.*” And she was right. As Christians we spend our entire lives trying to know and understand God more fully. **That’s what theology is; its *faith seeking understanding.***

If I ask most Christians what the word “sin” means, they’ll respond “**disobeying God.**” That’s a correct answer, but it’s not particularly helpful. Disobeying God is a “*moral definition*” of sin. But the problem is that we all sin, even when we try our best not to. **Dr. Nelson** introduced me to a Dr. Paul Tillich’s definition of sin. Tillich defines sin as “**alienation.**” Anything that separated you from God is sin. This isn’t so much a moral definition as it is a “*relational definition.*” In my ministry I’ve found that definition much more helpful. Jesus doesn’t just come to forgive our sins, which he does, **he reconnects us with God.** Jesus restores the relationship.

Jesus’ mission is to unify humanity with God which in turn unites us with each other. To unify is to act to bring together. That’s what Jesus does; he acts to unify. **It’s not the action of simply putting** the word “United” in front of a name that unites us, it’s putting Jesus at the center of our lives that unites us. Sin has, and is, alienating us from God. **And Christ has come to unify us with God.**

End III.

Move IV.

So, be unified as God is unified. The communion God the Father has with the God the Son and the Father and Son have with God Holy Spirit is an inseparable union. It's a scared union. It's a perfect union. It's a holy union. No one does anything without the other. That's why we describe the three persons of God as the trinity. **"A tri-unity."** They are three in one and One in three, a blessed trinity. **Jews and Muslims** don't get the trinity. To them it's blasphemy. The first tenant of Islam is that **"There is no God but God."** And in Judaism you have the Shema, **"Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One"** (Deuteronomy 6:4). **We do have one God.** We are not polytheist. **But God reveals** God's own self to us in three persons known to us as God the Father, and God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And God desires to include us within the relationship that exists within the Godhead. That's what it means to be united with God.

Like most of you, have I have heard many sermons on Christian unity over the years. I've even preached a few myself. But I fear that we're all doomed to keep making the same mistake over and over again. We think that if we can just get together and all be of one mind that we can overlook our many differences and unite ourselves. As a person who's been around churches for more than a half of century now, I can tell you from experience that doesn't ever happen. **Our differences are just too great. Some of us** were born in the City of Erie or maybe in Erie County, but not all of us were. I was born in Wheeling West Virginia. **Some of us** have family names that have been stalwarts in these parts for decades. Names like Gornall, and Restifo, and DiTullio. But others have family names that have never been heard in these parts before. **And some of us** have been lifelong United Methodist, while others have been Baptist, or Lutheran, or Presbyterian, or catholic to only name a few.

When I first began serving as pastor of the two-point charge in Punxsutawney back in 2003, **my district superintended**, Rev. John Ciampa, had a very wise saying. **He said that the loyalties** of the people in a church rest in one of three places. ***“Some people are loyal to a pastor.”*** While the pastor is there everything is great but as soon as they pastor leaves, they’re never be happy again. ***“And others are loyal to the church.”*** So long as the church stays the way it’s always been, they’re happy, but at the first hint that the future might be different from the past, they’ll never be happy again. ***“And still others are loyal to Christ.”*** They live in the world, but they are not of this world. Pastors will come and go, and they’ll not be moved. The local church may expand, or shrink, or even close, and they’ll not be moved. **O that we will all be loyal** to Christ through our church. **May we be one** with Christ as we allow Christ to make us one with each other, and one in ministry to all of the world. Christ is our unifier. **So, let’s be unified as God is unified.**

End IV.

Conclusion: We do like the ideal of being “united.” But sooner or later our very real differences raise their ugly heads and divide us. **Yes, our differences are glaringly obvious.** Some of us were born in Erie; some weren’t. Some of us have money; some are broke. Some like traditional worship; some like contemporary. **But God really does hold everything together.** God’s got the whole world in his hands, and Christ hold everything together. **And Christ has come to unify us with God.** It’s not the action of simply putting the word “United” in front of a name that unites us, it’s putting Jesus at the center of our lives that unites us. **So, let’s be unified as God is unified.** May we be one with Christ as we allow Christ to make us one with each other, and one in ministry to all of the world. We are “*Unified*” in Christ.

Closing Prayer: Let’s pray. O God, may we be one in your spirit and one in your love. One body, one Spirit, One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all (Ephesians 4:4-5). **Amen!**

10:30 Closing Hymn: “We Are One in the Spirit” On Screen
All Four Verses

Sending Forth: Are some of the people around you too different for you taste? Do they do things and like things that you don’t. Then you need to look to Christ for unity. Go forth unified in Christ as together we bring glory to God, now and forever. **Amen!**