

would say drew the Idaho band to want to help out the Yale basketball team: love for neighbor, a willingness to make a sacrifice on behalf of someone else, a desire to serve.

Now, I am very clear that the gospel itself is not a clear path to unity. Our divisions as Christians—all our denominations and various perspectives—are proof of that. But in calling people to be of one mind and one purpose, Paul wasn't speaking to all people across the world. He was writing to a small group of people trying to follow Jesus in one particular community in Corinth. Which is about the same as what we're trying to do here, in this place. Paul noticed that some divisions were getting in the way of the Corinthians following Jesus, and he wanted to draw them together in faith, once again.

I'm not aware of any big divisions in our specific congregation, thanks be to God. But we all know that divisions from the world we live in sometimes do crop up and affect the ways we work together, the decisions we make in our church and families, or just how we live as disciples. What does it take to seek unity in a community like ours, for people like us?

The call starts with practicing enough humility to see others' perspectives, to mean it when you pass the peace of Christ to someone. To pick up the phone and apologize when your words were misinterpreted. To cheer for a team that may not be 'yours' every once in a while, when it serves the common good. To try to understand the opinions of others, rather than lambasting them. To do things like these that the world outside might not understand, and to do them in full trust that - foolish or not - they are Christ's call to us.

And then, to filter all our decisions, words, actions through the lens of the cross: the message of Christ's love and grace, given as a free gift, which offers hope and peace for people everywhere. If our actions are trying to serve and live out that message in all we do, then we are more likely to be of one mind and one purpose. With humility and a focus on the message of Christ, then unity may be a gift we can actually sense, rather than just a pipe dream we can hardly imagine.

That sense of unity is a gift we should celebrate. But anytime we feel it, the credit for it shouldn't really go to us anyway. It is the Holy Spirit that empowers us and inspires our faith to act in these ways. It is the Spirit who draws us together, not to make us the same, but to lead us toward that common purpose of faith. So when we find ourselves in the middle of messy, painful divisions, we can focus on our own ability to humbly live out Christ's grace and love. While we also call on the Spirit to be the one to draw us together, to unify our hearts and minds, to hold us firm in the bonds of love.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

April 28, 2024
Fifth Sunday of Easter
"Uniting Spirit"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Acts 18:1-4 and 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

A few weeks ago, during the NCAA basketball tournament, an unlikely story of unity happened. Not on the court directly, but right next to it. Yale University's men's basketball team headed out west to play their game in the first round of the tournament. Normally, the school's marching band travels with the team to cheer them on and hype up the crowd. But when the tournament bracket was announced, Yale's marching band already had other plans scheduled over their spring break holiday. So, it looked like there would be no one in the stands supporting the team, and playing the Yale fight song, "Bulldog."

Enter the University of Idaho marching band. Their school was hosting the first two rounds of the March Madness tournament, and they were just putting away their trombones and bass drums after cheering on their own team in its final conference tournament games. That's when they heard that Yale's band couldn't come out west. So, the Idaho band decided they wanted to help out. They agreed to fill in for the Bulldog band. Idaho's band director, Spencer Martin said, "We want to help out another university. We want to help out another band."¹

They held a single rehearsal on a Friday morning, learned the notes to the Bulldog fight song, tweaked some of their own chants for the occasion and boarded the bus for the ride to the game. When they got off, Yale's spirit guard helped them don Yale t-shirts. The band dubbed themselves the "Vandogs"—a combination of the two mascots, the Idaho Vandals and the Yale Bulldogs. They regaled fans with music during the game and tried to distract the other team at the free throw line. Their commitment paid off, as Yale advanced to the second round of the tournament, knocking off the higher ranked Auburn University and winning only their second NCAA tournament game in school history. I hope the Vandog band took some of the credit! When it was all said and done, Yale University covered the cost of the Idaho band's bus, their shirts, and pizza. Otherwise, the band members played out of the goodness of their hearts and the joy of the game, or perhaps the joy of song! They offered a show of unity, friendship, and kindness, in a sport that is usually pretty cutthroat.

1 Rachel Treisman, "Why the University of Idaho marching band members are heroes in Connecticut," March 29, 2024, NPR, <https://www.npr.org/2024/03/29/1241585773/march-madness-yale-idaho-marching-band>

Sports remains a site of deep divisions among us. Maybe one that's easier to talk about than some of the other issues that divide us in politics or religion or way of life. The divisions we see in our scriptures today are both big and small. There were rivalries and factions forming among the believers in Corinth. They seemed to be forming around leaders with magnetic personalities, something like the star players who draw our attention and pull us toward their teams, today. But some of those teachers were departing from the gospel message Paul had originally preached among them. Perhaps it was some kind of heresy they were preaching. Or maybe the problem was more mundane, like that the identity of the person who baptized you held some kind of significance for your salvation. In the letter, Paul spends a lot of time contemplating who he did and did not baptize in Corinth, which points to this being at issue. Whatever was at the root, people in this early church were choosing sides and not playing well together. They were straying from the message of Christ that the apostles wanted to instill among them.

There was an even more serious kind of division mentioned in our Acts passage, too. Priscilla and Aquila had recently come to Corinth from Italy because the emperor there had thrown out all the Jewish people. At this time, the Romans practiced a particular kind of religious pluralism. They were happy to let people keep their own religion and adhere to their particular deities, as long as they also acknowledged the Roman gods as supreme. And worshiped the emperor as god, in addition. Jewish people in Rome refused this; their religion, and ours, is predicated on the worship of one God alone. They could not abide by this Roman provision. And eventually, the emperor could not abide their disobedience to it, so they were expelled. Priscilla and Aquila had sadly been purged from their home because of their faith, both their Jewish faith and their newer belief in Jesus Christ as the Messiah. They arrived in Corinth as the result of that religious persecution in Rome, only to be met with divisions among their fellow believers in their new city.

In light of these doctrinal factions and differences, Paul called for unity. "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose." The goal was to come together; be united. Get rid of the divisions and agree. If only that were as easy as donning another team's logo and playing their fight song for an afternoon.

As simple as it may seem, I think the Idaho band's action is instructive. The band's kindness offers some direction for how we can approach unity in the places we feel divided; for how we can be united in the same mind and purpose. The band did a thing that seems foolish in the eyes of the world: they cheered for a team to which they had no connection. They might have been

accused of selling out their own team by cheering for someone else. They got nothing in return for their action, except the joy of being generous. Paul says that the message of the cross will lead us to do some things that other people think are laughable, irresponsible even. But doing those things is actually a way we encounter God's saving grace. It's a way that we who follow Jesus seek out a shared purpose.

In large part, what the band did was to set aside their own views in order to see the world from another perspective. They were willing to silence their own voice for a time, in order to amplify the voice of someone else. In the divisions we face in this country, we often cannot imagine choosing to amplify someone else's perspective. We'd much rather take the wind out of their sails than make their message louder. But perhaps we don't even have to go so far as amplifying another perspective. Maybe just the willingness to try to see from another viewpoint pushes us toward togetherness. Because more commonly, we don't even try, or want to try, to understand why someone believes as they do. We just decide they're wrong and we're right; they must be crazy to think the way they do. But behind most every position that causes a division is a person with a story. And that story can explain a lot. That story can help us see that, even though we are different, there are usually common threads of life experience: similar challenges, parallel paths. Even if hearing the story doesn't mean we come out sharing the same beliefs, which we probably won't, seeing from another perspective may actually help us to be of the same mind on some things. Like about seeking the good of the other person. Or remembering that we are all made in God's image.

Hearing those stories and seeing the world from another perspective requires a bit of humility. I feel like the call to be humble comes up a lot in my preaching these days. Maybe that's because our world seems to have such a shortage of humility, while humility is at the core of our Christian faith. It's humility we practice when we acknowledge our sin and ask forgiveness. It's humility we honor when we look at Jesus, a savior who was crucified. We are not able to see from anyone else's perspective unless we humble ourselves—and shut our own mouths—long enough to listen to them; to try to understand what it's like to walk in their shoes. Humility is what helps us set aside our own assumptions and beliefs to be able to hear something different; to at least open the door to being of the same mind.

Now, the apostle Paul himself is not known for his humility. But nonetheless, in his appeal to the Corinthian church, Paul did not ask the members to rally behind *him* and his perspective as the way to overcome their divisions. He called them toward the gospel itself. He urged them to be of one mind and one purpose, focused on the strange and seemingly foolish message of the cross. Which is a message of love, sacrifice, and service. Those are the things I