

## What Binds Us? Called to Serve (Part 3)

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Isaiah 61:1-4 & Col 3:12-17

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Over the last few weeks, we've been exploring the question "What Binds Us?" That is, what binds us together, uniting us as followers of Christ, and what binds us within ourselves, keeping us from reaching our full potential as individuals and as a community?

Most of us agree that we live in an increasingly polarized society. Seems like you have to be on one side or the other. You watch Fox News or CNN. You think President Trump is a shrewd and effective leader or a shameful bully. You prefer to worship in the Community Center or the Sanctuary. It seems we have to choose... one side or another...black or white... male or female.

We struggle to find common ground, even at church. What can we agree on? When should we agree to disagree? What shared beliefs, customs, and commitments connect us so that we can live as the one, unified body of Christ?

It wasn't so different for the community of Colossae who received Paul's letter. Paul doesn't write the letter to the Colossians because everyone is getting along swimmingly. This letter points to a community that is struggling and in conflict. What we read is, "As God's chosen ones, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, and patience...forgive each other as the Lord has forgiven you. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which you were called in the one body. Be thankful...And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus."

What Paul means is, "You are God's children, so behave like it. You are wearing clothes unbecoming a Christian—you're harsh, strident and judgmental. You gossip and take sides rather than deal with disagreements. It's time to wear love wherever you go. You must work harder to build connections and unity. Stop taking your Christian community for granted. Remember, everything you do and say should reflect the grace you have received and bring honor to God. It's time for a new wardrobe!

Questions of unity, of common ground, of what binds us, remain vital questions 2000 years later. These last few weeks, several people have suggested images and ideas about what bind us.

Carol Bock notes the Celtic wedding ritual called binding or handfasting. Handfasting takes place during the ceremony as part of the exchange of vows. As the promises are shared, the minister wraps a series of cords, usually three or more in various colors, around the couples' clasped hands. This knot signifies the couple binding their lives together. It's a visual symbol of the union of their hopes and dreams. This is where we get the expression "tying the knot."

Another member reminded us of the Jewish 'akedah,' the binding of Isaac. Akedah literally means 'binding' in Hebrew. You might remember this is when God asks Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, who was born to him and Sarah in their old age. Abraham obeys God, taking Isaac away to literally give his life over to God. He binds Isaac's hands and feet, and lays him on the altar. Just as the sacrifice is to take place, God provides a lamb in the thicket and Isaac is saved. The Akedah is read every year on the second day of Rosh Hashanah and has become, for Jewish people, the supreme example of obedience to God's will. I imagine this very story was running through Jesus' mind as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemene the night before he faced the cross.

Surely, we are bound to God, to another and to our church by our promises and our obedience. In this series, Pastor James and I have looked to the Trinity itself-- Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as our inspiration and guide. What bind us together is this community that is God---the three in one.

Remember first, we are bound together by God, who creates us in his image. We share a common humanity. We are all children of God, designed with purpose, worthy of love, and deserving of respect.

Second, we are bound together by Christ, who gathers us at his table. We share the cup of blessing and the bread of life. Through Communion, we literally experience community with Christ, our savior and with each other. This meal helps us remember there is one bread, and we who are many are the one body of Christ, for we all partake of the one bread.

And today, we assert that we are also bound together by the Holy Spirit, who calls us to go and serve---just like Jesus.

Jesus comes among as one who serves. When Jesus begins his ministry, he enters the synagogue and begins to read Isaiah 61, the passage we read this morning. He says... “The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me. The LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor.” Luke writes that Jesus then rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant, and sits down. Everyone in the synagogue is looking at him. Then Jesus says to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Later in Luke Jesus says, “the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. I am among you as one who serves.” As followers of Jesus, we too have been called by the Spirit to serve, to comfort all who mourn, to bind up the brokenhearted, to build up, to raise and repair all that has been ruined.

East Union is no stranger to such work. Our commitment to mission, to serving the poor, to feed the hungry, to provide for others' needs, to share the Good News -- is a vital unifying force among us. We serve our community through local mission projects like housing the West Deer Food Bank, coordinating the Meals on the Go Program, hosting the homeless through IHN, to welcoming several scout troops and addiction support groups, to providing Thanksgiving baskets. We serve our region by preparing and serving dinners at the East End Ministry Shelter, and delivering clothes and Christmas gifts to Cabwaylingo Chapel in West Virginia. We serve our world through our Living Waters for the World projects in Haiti, our sister congregation in Ensoni, Malawi and supporting various trips and presbytery projects. Several years ago, during our Strategic Planning Process, East Union’s mission emphasis was identified as a core strength of our congregation. The range and vitality of our mission projects and programs are something to which even the largest, most affluent churches aspire. And the year ahead will surely bring us new and exciting opportunities to serve.

When Pastor James and I describe our church we find ourselves saying, ‘Well, we have lots of young families, amazing youth, and many adults of all ages. We have

three unique worship services, wonderful musicians, and a gorgeous campus. We have kids from at least five school districts, and a wide range of income levels. We have people raised protestant, catholic and without any faith. We have conservative people and liberal people, and lots in-between. But the one thing we all agree on is mission.

We believe as God's people, we are called to share the Good News of God's love by feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, providing for those who are less fortunate. Despite our many differences--in how we look, what we believe, where we prefer to worship--we share a common call to serve that binds us together in Christ. Pastor James and I are humbled and honored to serve such an amazing family faith!

New Testament scholar, Donald Carson, puts it this way, "The church itself is not made up of natural "friends." In fact, it's likely made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything of the sort. Christians come together, not because we form a natural collection, but because we have been loved by Jesus Christ...In this light, we are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus' sake."

And as a band of ragamuffin disciples, we are bound together not because we are alike, or because we agree on everything or because we are perfect. We are bound together by love---by God's creative love, Christ's sacrificial love and the Spirit's empowering love. We are bound together because we are God's children, nourished by his grace and called to go and serve...to serve God, one another, and the world!

So as our Catholic brothers and sisters say, "Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord!"

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!