

Uncommon Fellowship: 1. Unity

John 17:20-23

August 20, 2017

Pastor Steve Richards

In recent days, I've been thinking about an experience that I had in 1978. I grew up inside a bubble. I didn't know it then, and in so many ways, I am grateful today that I did. I grew up in a small town in southern Minnesota and then went off to college in a slightly larger small town also in southern Minnesota. And in 1978, I moved to Dallas, Texas to begin graduate school. Soon after I arrived, I noticed on a bulletin board a job posting for a church organist and choir director for a United Methodist Church in south Dallas. I needed the income, and I had just graduated with a degree in vocal music with an emphasis on the organ, so I called the number that was listed. The pastor invited me to come to the church and play something for her so she would know that I knew how to play the organ. After I played the piece that I had prepared, she offered me the job – and for the next nine months, every Sunday and every Wednesday, I did what I could to provide music for the one worship service on Sunday mornings.

It was a small church with a big dream of getting much larger. The first phase of the building had been built a few years before I came on the scene. We worshipped in what was the chapel, and there was a sketch in the hallway of what the sanctuary would look like when it was time for the next building phase. But then something began to happen. I learned that the church was located in what was called a “changing neighborhood.” It was a term that I had never heard and not sure that I fully understand it even today. But someone in the neighborhood had put their house up for sale and it was purchased by an African-American family. This was the first black family to move into what had been a completely white neighborhood and in a short period of time more houses went on the market as house prices began to fall. More African-American families moved into the neighborhood and some began attending the church. At the same time as the church gained a few black families, it lost most of the white families who moved out of the neighborhood either because the color of the neighborhood was changing or the value of their homes was declining. (Get out before you lost all the equity in your home.) The neighborhood was changing, and the church was changing too, and at the end of the school year, I was told that my services were no longer needed – because the church was closing. All those years ago, I wish I had asked more questions. I don't know that I could have influenced anything, but I wish I had paid more attention. Often we cannot see in the moment what we can see in the rearview mirror. But I was seeing then was a church that was struggling – and ultimately not succeeding – to be what I think Jesus calls us to be – an Uncommon Fellowship. If we get this right, we are at the center of what God has called us to be in this world.

Uncommon means “out of the ordinary, unusual, unconventional.” Before there was what became known as the church, there was a fellowship – an uncommon fellowship. In fact, the first Bible translated by William Tyndale from Greek into English did not include the word “church”. The Greek word that others would later translate as church is *ekklesia*, literally “fellowship.” And what is “fellowship” but a mutually beneficial relationship.

Once upon a time, there was a group of people who came together and their faith was characterized by Uncommon Fellowship. They were rich people, poor people, citizens and slaves, Jews and Gentiles, men and women and children – all came together around one simple idea that unified them. And other people looked at them and said, what in the world are they doing together? How do they even know each other? And how is it that they seem to be getting along? In the first century, these groups of people did not associate with each other, but they began gathering together early in the morning on the first day of the week. It was early in the

morning because the first day of the week was a work day. They gathered and sang and shared a meal. There was teaching and then they committed themselves to being the best citizens in the Roman Empire. They believed that God was spirit and not some idol or statute to be worshipped. They believed that women and children had value. They believed that a person could actually know God. And as a result, many of them were betrayed by friends, rejected by the Temple, persecuted by the Empire, and yet the movement spread. And what got people's attention was the uncommon association of people who before they came together had absolutely nothing in common. But they found something in common in the person of Jesus. And that's what held them together.

Jesus had modeled this. He associated with people that no righteous, religious person of the first century would ever associate with. He did a favor for a centurion when he should not have associated with a centurion. He honored and respected women – nobody did that. He stopped his teaching to welcome children – nobody did that. People did not even name their babies until they were sure the baby would survive childhood. Imagine the day when Jesus stopped at the tax collector's booth with his disciples. Jesus looked at Matthew and said, "I want you to join my group." And Peter and the others were thinking: "he can't join our group. We will not associate with a tax collector." There were sinners and then there were tax collectors. Even sinners did not want to associate with tax collectors. It's bad enough that Jesus was talking to Matthew; he can't join us! But Jesus doesn't ask their permission. He says to Matthew, "Follow me." And then Jesus tells the others, "We're going to eat at Matthew's house." What?! We can't go to his house, we can't even associate with him! But Jesus says, If you are following me, we are going into his house. This whole episode got people's attention. Nobody did this. It was uncommon fellowship.

One day, Jesus and his disciples were outside Caesarea Philippi and they were talking about names. And Jesus said, "Who do people say I am?" And they say, "some people think you are a prophet from the past who has come back to life." But then Peter says, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." And do you know what Jesus said? He stopped them and said, **You are Peter and on this rock I will build my ekklesia...** fellowship, a gathering of people unlike anything the world has ever seen. They will gather together not because they make the same amount of money or have similar status in society. The only reason they will come together is that they believe Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. **You are Peter and on this rock I will build my ekklesia, and the gates of death will not overcome it.** And the gates of death – not even death can defeat this fellowship. This will continue for generations. Jesus is saying, I will build my ekklesia and you can join me or ignore me or fight me, but in the end there will be an uncommon fellowship.

In fact, Jesus prayed for this. In John 17, Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane. He's finished the Last Supper, and he knows that the end is near. The sequence of events that will lead to his death have begun. And he is praying. First he prays that God will be glorified. Second, he prays for his first century followers. And then, he prays for you and me. He prays for our children and our grandchildren. **I pray for those who believe in me through their message...** What did he pray for? There's a lot he could have prayed for. We're a mess a lot of the time. He could have prayed a long list of things, but as Jesus thought about the future – as he thought about us, here was his primary concern. **I pray for those who believe in me through their message that all of them may be one.** He prayed for our UNITY, because I think Jesus knew it would be challenging. He's praying, **May they also be in us so that...** Do you remember English grammar? The two words "so that" is called the purpose clause. We are about to hear the purpose of this prayer. The purpose is not about us. **...so that the world may believe that you have sent me.** The future of the church depends on our ability to get over our differences and

be a united front to the world – that we believe Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. This isn't about just getting along. It's so the world can see Jesus in us.

If we don't get this right, I'm not sure it matters what else we get right. If we don't get this right, everything else we do – and we do some great things – does it matter, really? He prays: **Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.** Jesus prays, God if you will answer this prayer that they will be one as you and I are one, the world will see you. The world will recognize something is going on here. Why would Jesus pray this? You don't pray for easy things that you know will happen anyway. He prays this because he knows it's difficult. And to be sure we get this, just minutes earlier he gave his disciples a new command: **Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.** He moved from the Golden Rule to the Platinum Rule. You won't love each other because you want them to love you back. I want you to love as I have loved you. This should define your ekklesia.

So Charlottesville, Virginia last Saturday. Do you know what the neo-Nazis and KKK were chanting in Charlottesville last Saturday? "Blood and soil." Sounds harmless, doesn't it? Until you know those words were the rallying cry of the Nazis in Germany in the 1930s and 40s that justified the extermination of Jews. Blood and soil – only the white people, only the Aryans belong and death to all others. My hope is that we don't need a message from me to know what's wrong with hate speech like that. More than 400,000 American men and women gave their lives in World War 2 to put an end to that kind of ideology. But in case you missed it, the most underreported part of what happened last Saturday was what the church was doing. It's the uncommon fellowship. Clergy from Charlottesville and the surrounding area put on their clerical garb, linked arms, and silently walked into the center of the conflict, knelt down and prayed silently. They stood up and one by one they prayed aloud – and then they scattered and listened to people and came to the aid of the injured. When Jesus said, "Love as I have loved you" that goes beyond kindness, goes beyond good listening, goes beyond being patient – it goes to the point of being willing to lay down your life for one another. And here's the promise: **By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.** The world will know – if you have the same theology? If you interpret the Bible the same way? If you do church the same way? No! If you love one another – because unselfish, unconditional love fuels Uncommon Fellowship.

I think everyone wants to be loved. I think everyone wants to be forgiven and cared for. At some point, everyone will need someone to come alongside. I think everyone wants someone who will be honest with them. I think everyone needs to be restored somewhere in life. Everybody needs to be love. Everybody at some point will be the "one another." It wasn't easy in the first century. The church almost ended because Peter and the disciples could not see their way around accepting Gentiles. Only when God intervened did Peter move beyond his notion of who was accepted and not accepted. It's not easy. Jesus didn't ask us to do what's easy – but what's uncommon.

Let me give you a simple way that this works. A first grader named Christian live in Pennsylvania and got this idea of creating a buddy bench in his school playground. He knew that some kids felt lonely at recess, so he got permission to designate one bench as the buddy bench. 8 of 10 children feel lonely at some point during recess. We need more buddy benches – and people who will step forward to be a buddy. Will we? And not just people like me – who think like me or believe like me or vote like me or live like me. What if people said, "We don't know how to love one another, let's see how Messiah Church does it." God wants to birth something new, something uncommon – an ekklesia – though you and me.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of August 20, 2017

Weekly Prayer: God of all wisdom, open our hearts and minds to your name and to your mercy, so that we can acknowledge that all along you have loved us. May we be warmed and empowered by your love. Help us to model what we have found in Jesus so that we can offer the unity of love in a hurting and divided world, through Christ, your beloved Son. Amen.

Monday, August 21

Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? It's good for nothing except to be thrown away and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

Observation: This was the keynote of Jesus' call to citizens of “the kingdom of God.” He didn't specify that those who follow him should go to a certain place. He called them to live in a certain way for God. I remember hearing about a church that gave their members T-shirts. On the front, they read, “I don't go to church,” and on the back, they said, “I AM the church.” That reflected Jesus' message. As we let God's light shine through us, we truly ARE the church.

Application: Have you ever flown over a city at night? Or driven along a highway from the dark countryside into the light of a city? Think about what it felt like to go from darkness to light. What are the dark corners of your neighborhood, city, and world that need to experience God's light? What can you do to help shine God's light into these dark corners?

Prayer: Lord God, if I forget, remind me that “we the people” ARE the church. By your Spirit, help me to live as your salt and light, your physical presence, right here in my hometown. Amen.

Tuesday, August 22

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:5-10

You yourselves are being built like living stones into a spiritual temple. You are being made into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Thus it is written in scripture, Look! I am laying a cornerstone in Zion, chosen, valuable. The person who believes in him will never be shamed. So God honors you who believe. For those who refuse to believe, though, the stone the builders tossed aside has become the capstone. This is a stone that makes people stumble and a rock that makes them fall. Because they refuse to believe in the word, they stumble. Indeed, this is the end to which they were appointed. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light. Once you weren't a people, but now you are God's people. Once you hadn't received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Observation: Peter's description of what it means to belong to God's people, the church, showed how New Testament Christians found Jesus' work and its effects all through the Old Testament. Verse 6 quoted Isaiah 28:16; verse 7 drew on Psalm 118:22; verse 8 used Isaiah 8:14. Verse 9 took language that first applied to Israel in Exodus 19:6, and verse 10 played off

the sadly symbolic names of Hosea's children in Hosea 1. Peter's point was that God's mercy draws and shapes us all into a community in order to bear witness to God's marvelous light.

Application: Peter applied powerful Old Testament terms for Israel to God's people, the church, calling them (us) "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (verse 9). How can we as a faith community show God's grace and light in ways we can't do alone? How can a sense that together we are God's hands in the world help us better understand the meaning of "church"?

Prayer: Lord God, I often fail you, yet you call me chosen, holy, a part of a royal priesthood. Help me each day as I seek to live into the amazing titles with which you honor me. Amen.

Wednesday, August 23

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

There are different spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; and there are different ministries and the same Lord; and there are different activities but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good. A word of wisdom is given by the Spirit to one person, a word of knowledge to another according to the same Spirit, faith to still another by the same Spirit, gifts of healing to another in the one Spirit, performance of miracles to another, prophecy to another, the ability to tell spirits apart to another, different kinds of tongues to another, and the interpretation of the tongues to another. All these things are produced by the one and same Spirit who gives what he wants to each person.

Observation: The apostle Paul explained to the Corinthian Christians that God gives each Christian gifts and talents that empower us to join in the divine mission of changing the world for the better. But no one person receives all the gifts and talents needed for the job. There aren't good and bad, or even important and unimportant, sets of abilities and gifts. God wants each believer to fill a place that makes the overall body stronger.

Application: In what ways are you already using your particular gifts and talents to bless others and bring glory to God? Have you ever seen your gifts become more effective when they work together with other people's various gifts? Consider participating in the LAUNCH training on Saturday morning, August 26 where we will help you live into God's preferred dream for your life. Contact Kami Pohl to register (kpohl@messiahchurchmn.org).

Prayer: Generous God, you've given me a portion of your divine power. You've called me to use that power in carrying out your mission in the world. I offer you the gifts you've given me to be used for your purposes. Amen.

Thursday, August 24

Scripture: John 4:19-29

The woman said, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you and your people say that it is necessary to worship in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you and your people will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You and your people worship what you don't know; we worship what we know because salvation is from the Jews. But the time is coming—and is here!—when true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth. The Father looks for those who worship him this way. God is spirit, and it is necessary to worship God in spirit and truth." The

woman said, "I know that the Messiah is coming, the one who is called the Christ. When he comes, he will teach everything to us." Jesus said to her, "I Am—the one who speaks with you." Just then, Jesus' disciples arrived and were shocked that he was talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?" The woman put down her water jar and went into the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who has told me everything I've done! Could this man be the Christ?"

Observation: Jesus met a person with three strikes against her in the eyes of the religious leaders of his day: 1) she was a Samaritan, 2) she was a woman, 3) she'd had multiple husbands. To his disciples' surprise, he treated her as valuable. In fact, verses 28-29 show her as the first "preacher," the first witness to Jesus in John's gospel! Jesus needed his disciples to know that human prejudices or boundaries did not limit his kingdom.

Application: The woman expected Jesus, a Jewish man, to despise and avoid her. But he spoke to her seriously, asked her help and treated her with dignity. He refused to argue about whether Jerusalem or Gerizim was the true holy mountain. He said the key was that people worship "in spirit and truth" (verse 24). What makes it necessary to honestly open your whole inner life to God's love and grace in order to worship in spirit and truth?

Prayer: God, open my heart and mind to your word. Bless me with your vision and let me enter into a state of harmony with your divine will. Amen.

Friday, August 25

Scripture: Ephesians 3:10-21

God's purpose is now to show the rulers and powers in the heavens the many different varieties of his wisdom through the church. This was consistent with the plan he had from the beginning of time that he accomplished through Christ Jesus our Lord. In Christ we have bold and confident access to God through faith in him. So then, I ask you not to become discouraged by what I'm suffering for you, which is your glory.

This is why I kneel before the Father. Every ethnic group in heaven or on earth is recognized by him. I ask that he will strengthen you in your inner selves from the riches of his glory through the Spirit. I ask that Christ will live in your hearts through faith. As a result of having strong roots in love, I ask that you'll have the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth, together with all believers. I ask that you'll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God. Glory to God, who is able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine by his power at work within us; glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations, forever and always. Amen.

Observation: God has a big dream—to restore our world to total wholeness (see Revelation 21:1-5). In divine wisdom, God seems to believe that faithful humans are the best means to carry out that mission. Pastor Bill Hybels (Willow Creek Church, Chicago) says that "the local church is the hope of the world." The apostle Paul would agree. He wrote that the church is God's main instrument to show his wisdom and glory. And "the church" is people—is us.

Application: In Greek, "the many different varieties" in verse 10 was one word— "polupoikilos." It meant "many colored," as though Paul was picturing God's grace and wisdom as a kind of cosmic rainbow. In what ways have God's grace and wisdom added color and beauty to your life? How can you help your church reflect that beauty to all who come in contact with us?

Prayer: Great God, I know you have big plans for the world. I know your plans are to use your church to accomplish your purposes. Help me be faithful to you as part of your church, and join in your work in the world. Amen.

Saturday, August 26

Scripture: Ephesians 4:25-32

Therefore, after you have gotten rid of lying, each of you must tell the truth to your neighbor because we are parts of each other in the same body. Be angry without sinning. Don't let the sun set on your anger. Don't provide an opportunity for the devil. Thieves should no longer steal. Instead, they should go to work, using their hands to do good so that they will have something to share with whoever is in need. Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth. Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say. Don't make the Holy Spirit of God unhappy—you were sealed by him for the day of redemption. Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil. Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ.

Observation: These verses set out a challenging standard for Christian interactions. They call Christians to live by a simple guideline: “Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community.” Often, that stops being easy or simple when the community does something differently from the way we would have liked to see it done. But it is precisely at those times of change, when stress and tension tend to rise, that the guidelines in today’s reading become most crucial for all of us to live into.

Application: The sad fact is that Christians can act Unchristian. Ephesians 4:32 said our ideal is to treat one another “in the same way God forgave you in Christ.” Have you learned ways to “be angry without sinning” (verse 26)? What steps can help you grow a character strong enough to treat others as God treats you? Have you been through times when it was helpful to hold back a comment or observation, even if it might be accurate? Are there other times, as verse 25 suggested, when the truth is so needed and helpful that it would be wrong to keep silent? How can the Holy Spirit help you discern when you should speak the truth without being unchristian?

Prayer: Creating, Redeeming God, your gracious acceptance has brought me life. Give me the courage to speak truth in love, the humility to say I’m sorry when I’m wrong and the heart to forgive others who admit a wrong. Amen.