

# Marion weekly update

SERMON March 3, “Keys to Kindness: Unity” March 10

In Marion through Lent we’ve been using the same themes as the other churches in our cluster each week. I’m not fully sure how you all have been tackling them but in Marion we’ve looked at the theme, tied it to how it helps us become more consistently and unconditionally kind, and then plumbing deeper to how it impacts the fullness of our faith. Today our theme is unity.

We’re going to look at unity from the perspective first of what a lack of unity does with regards to kindness and work forward from negative to positive. The word unity has more than one definition. Two that I believe correspond to our theme today are: a condition of harmony : ACCORD, and a totality of related parts , an entity that is a complex or systematic whole.

A simpler way of putting this might be to be together as one, though not necessarily being in complete agreement with one another. Unity and agreement are not the same. Unity is very much about having foundational goals, values, and purpose that are shared. The way to accomplish these things might be up for disagreement, but at the base everyone has the same end game in mind.

For Christians these might be things like bringing people to Christ, receiving Christ be Lord and Savior, and letting the Holy Spirit be our guide. It could be things like pulling together to see the best for humanity and achieving it through kindness, grace, mercy, and love. These are all uniting foundational essentials that give us common goals and hopes.

In the midst of all of this there can be disagreement on myriad other things. However the uniting power of what we share in common tempers this, calling us to overcome ourselves. Even embracing the disagreement for the conversation it creates to bring forth the best possible path forward to ensure that the main things are being pursued.

What we see now in the world is an unfortunate example of what happens when we are not united and allow disagreement to divide us. Politics has created an environment where unkindness is common and expected. Hate and insult are freely put forth against those that disagree with a preferred platform or policy. Misinformation, disinformation, and outright lies are fair game if it furthers an agenda. All of these constitute a gross unkindness. Sadly these very same attributes are seen throughout Christianity and even within our denomination. It’s not about finding a way towards unity. It’s about forcing the opposing side to agree or taking our ball and leaving to go play with people who think exactly the same.

In the end all this attitude does is widen the division and ensure that there is less and less balance to find an answer to whatever issue that serves the greater good of the most. The answers are more and more geared to serve only the people who ascribe to that extreme sensibility.

Scripture tells us the ultimate end to this reality.

“A house divided against itself can not stand.” Why do we see things failing? What are there stone-walls to progress? Why is Christianity fading? Jesus tells us exactly why. When we can’t be united amongst ourselves outside forces don’t have to do much for us to crumble. We do the work ourselves. This is why those bits of misinformation, disinformation, and lies are the most effective means to take down any group. The more people can be baited into believing the lie and being turned against each other the weaker things become.

It also puts the lie to many of our cherished acclamations. In the Apostles Creed we say that we believe in the “holy catholic church”, catholic meaning the universal church. If we are comfortable fighting and turning on our fellow Christians this claim rings quite hollow. In our pledge of allegiance we say “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” When people get baited into turning on their fellow Americans to the point of hatred and aggression this claim is no longer true. We have become a nation that is not one, and is clearly divisible.

What does God call us to? Simple, unity. Jesus’ prayer in the garden is famous, quoted, and in times of deep division sadly ignored. His message holds true. That we might be one as He and the Father are

One. We have unity with one another so that we are all pulling in the same direction. If we have disagreements we aren't necessarily at odds with one another and together can find the right path to which we can all commit. It takes openness and humility to embrace such an ideal. When we do there is no stopping us. When we do we are actually forsaking our own privilege in favor of following the lead of God. This has always been God's desire.

When Israel came together as a nation it happened under a human king. God had demonstrated time and again that when they allowed God to lead and rule them they would be victorious and successful. They rejected God by choosing to follow a man and things took a downward turn. Following a human king led them eventually to exile and being dispersed among the nations. Trying to unite under a man only took three kings before the nation split in two and the rest was unfortunate history.

Over and over again the lament of God was that even when their rituals of worship were observed. The people were mistreating one another and not truly together. Lack of kindness on grand scale.

When we are united this turns around. Ephesians chapter 2 tells us that with the coming and redemption of Christ the world is united whether it wants to be or not. We are united in the common problem of sin and the common solution of Jesus. The result is that there is no division in God's eyes. We are all united under the umbrella of Christ. The question is whether or not we embrace that unity.

When we look at the community in Christ in the New Testament as it formed in Acts we see an ideal to strive for. Everyone pulling in the same direction. United in love for one another that bears out in meeting one another's needs, wanting to be in fellowship with each other, and putting the needs of the other before our own. Paul as the church developed wrote to remind them to put aside squabbles in favor of lifting one another up with the essentials of faith as the foundation. Believe in God, trust ourselves to Christ, follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Above all invite the world into relationship with Jesus.

Stand out and be different. How are we different today? We refuse to entertain the divisive nonsense of the world in favor of being united together in Christ.

When we have all this as a common goal, kindness has to flow from it. The only way we hear one another amidst differences and key on the strength of where we are alike is to have all of it covered with kindness. Indeed if we truly have the love in our hearts we claim to have we can't help but let kindness reign in everything we say, do, and are.

Our denomination is getting ready for a heavy General Conference. How that affects every church and every United Methodist has everything to do with the spirit we choose to carry into it. Going into it with a spirit of division makes one ripe to swallow lies and be tempted to make excuse for unkindness. Going into it with a spirit of unity makes one clear minded looking for connection, open to offering grace, and more likely to find a path forward together. Our cluster this week chose unity for a reason. As we share pulpits, we trust that we can do so because as fellow Christians and United Methodists we are united in faith, love, and purpose. This is the spirit we encourage all of us to bring moving forward not just in our denomination. Bring it forth in family, friendships, as fellow citizens, as fellow pilgrims in this world along with every other soul with whom we share the world.

After all, when we meet in the Kingdom of Heaven one day all of this divisive nonsense will be gone. God will realize things for the way they were created to be. One people and one Kingdom. If we truly mean "thy Kingdom come they will be done on earth as it is in heaven" we begin by overcoming the separation of the world and coming together under the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three in one. Always united in fullness and love.

## BIBLE STUDY 1 Samuel 11

In this chapter we see Saul rise to the level of leadership one would expect from a king. There is an imminent threat to Israel and he rises to the occasion.

Something significant to know is that it is likely that Nahash wasn't on his first run at Jabesh. There is evidence that he'd already gone after the tribes of Gad and Reuben and done some eye gouging there. This would have been terrifying. It was proof that his words weren't an empty threat. What

Nahash threatened he would deliver on. Gouging out an eye would put him at a grand advantage. The lack of depth perception would make sure the Ammonites had the upper hand in any battle.

The reaction of the elders is understandable. There might be a question about why on earth they would tell the enemy they were buying time to find someone to come to their rescue. In truth, the writer may have been simply condensing information. They may have asked for some time to determine if they would surrender, AND had the chat amongst themselves about what they would be doing during that time. They sneakily and wisely bought time to try and find someone who could spare them. Saul is found doing menial labor. This is a good thing. It tells us that wherever Saul goes in his journey as king, at the outset he has his head on right. He isn't lording his title over anyone. He's not being arrogant or prideful. He's just gone back to what he knows. Plowing fields. Why wasn't he being about more kingly duties? Why would he? He has no example to follow. There is no throne. There is no palace. All he can do is what is familiar.

When word gets to him about the situation in Jabesh Saul goes off. It says the "spirit of God came upon him." This is very much Samson language. He is overwhelmed with the Spirit and responds with authority and passion. He will not let his people suffer. Remember that this was the reason for a king, to protect the people. Saul meets this challenge dutifully. They have heard about his prophesying when the spirit came on him before. Now it has happened again. Saul's response is severe.

Just like the Levite and the concubine, Saul hacks up his oxen and sends pieces of them throughout Israel with a message. Give me your able bodied soldiers or I'll come and hack up your livestock. The message has teeth as he's taken out his own oxen to make the example. Not only does Saul have the backing of Samuel as king, now he's established that he's willing to take extreme measures to raise an army for the protection of this newly unified nation. Saul has guts here and isn't afraid to use them.

The tribes respond and send lots of soldiers. Here there is an interesting little detail that will push into the next chapter. There are different writers in the Old Testament just as in the New. This writer is called the Deuteronomistic writer. The book of Deuteronomy sets out a theology that shifts as time goes on. It's the very basic "do good and good will happen to you, do bad and bad will happen to you." In this instance the detail is the oddity that Israel and Judah are mentioned separately. Why? In Solomon's time as king the nation split into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. They aren't there yet. They are simply twelve tribes coming together as one nation.

The issue is that the Deuteronomistic writer, who wrote what is called the Deuteronomistic history (these books), wrote them during the Babylonian exile. This was much later than the events in the book. The author had knowledge that wasn't present in the time written about, but would have been foundational to the writer. The point being that the division of Judah and Israel was well understood and likely an involuntary reality. The natural inclination would be separate the two from reflex.

The next piece is strategically masterful. The elders from Jabesh surrender to the Ammonites. This puts the Ammonites at ease. They think they've won so there's no need to be on guard. Saul takes advantage and attacks. The Ammonites are slaughtered. For Saul this is a HUGE win. He is showing that not only has God anointed him but he's got the chops to take care of the business of guarding Israel. And the people love him for it.

The love him to the point that they want to kill the folks who doubted him as king. This would be the guys at the end of chapter 10. Just remember that their doubt may not have been all that unfounded. Here however the broader population is very pro-Saul. In my opinion this tells us something about the stability of the nation. It's not stable at all. In one single moment they are ready to kill their own because of a difference of opinion about the leadership. They are not well.

This is a cautionary tale for us. In our own political climate we see the same thing. Whomever supports the candidate opposite our own is the enemy. They are hated. In some cases there is an aggressive and even violent disposition towards them. No different than Israel here. It's unhealthy and a bit scary.

Saul on the other hand demonstrates that in his early kingship he's got a right outlook. He tells them

to spare the naysayers. He also gives the glory for the victory to God. This is encouraging. He's got his sights set on God and honoring God. He also has his sights set on mercy even for those who oppose him. It seems like a good recipe for a king of Israel.

There is then a second celebration to install Saul as king. This might seem redundant and there isn't a solid Biblical explanation for why this happened. That said I offer a very human explanation. The first installation of Saul was less than stellar. He was hiding in the baggage and had to be sought out and dragged out. This isn't exactly an inspiring introduction. Now Saul has shown himself to be a leader, able to rally the troops, and victorious. He's demonstrated kingly qualities. Perhaps this was in response to seeing that the man who hid in the baggage has shown himself to be a true protector of Israel.

Saul is starting out well. If we know how this all plays out our hearts are saddened at knowing how far he falls. At the moment at least he and Samuel are tight and he's got his sights fixed on God's hand.