

**“Things that Unite Us”**  
**Exodus 20:1–20; Philippians 3:4b–14**  
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We are living a divisive time. Perhaps not since the Civil War have we been as divided as we are now in this nation. It doesn't matter what issue or event you want to name — the protests about racial injustice or the embarrassing train wreck of a presidential debate Tuesday night — people see and hear the same things in entirely different ways, depending on their assumptions. And rather than modeling something different and better, the church is often simply a reflection of the culture around us. We talk about unity and common ground. We sing of our oneness in Christ, especially on World Communion Sunday. But our differences in the church today are painfully obvious.

Ironically COVID-19 seems to be the one thing we all have in common. This virus doesn't respect national boundaries; geographic differences; social, economic and racial distinctions; or anything else. It doesn't even care if we believe in its power, deny its significance or pretend to deny its significance. It just does its damage, spreading rapidly, taking lives, destroying businesses, turning life upside down. It threatens us all, and thus we are all united, or at least should be united, in our response to it. How any one of responds affects the experience of others not just in this state and nation, but around the world.

But is there nothing, other than a virus, that can bring us together? Are there not positive things that unite us and thus transcend all the differences we have, especially in the church?

There are and it begins with our common ground in Christ, but this means more than simply saying that we believe in Jesus. Writing to the church at Philippi, the Apostle Paul says that compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ as Lord, he counts all of his credentials and accomplishments — which are numerous — as *rubbish*, at least this is

what the NRSV says. It is a euphemism, an effort to clean things up for us respectable folk. Some old translations, including the KJV, use the word *dung*, but it too is a euphemism for the Greek word *skuvala* which should be rendered with a word beginning with the letter *s* in English. Paul is using a profanity to shock his readers.

I will never forget the first time I heard a preacher cuss in a sermon. I was a teenager and I perked up, I listened much more carefully. I'm not suggesting we use colorful metaphors recklessly. Public discourse has declined far enough already. But there are times when it takes strong language to get people's attention.

Paul could just say that Jesus is important to him, and people would get what he is saying and try to make sure Jesus is important to them, but how important? More important than our credentials and accomplishments? More important than our political biases? More important than our money? Paul says that compared to knowing Christ, everything else is a pile of you know what! Can we say that?

If our connection to Christ is going to unite us across all differences, it will have to be this kind of connection. Otherwise, we may say that we have common ground, but what matters more is whether we are a Democrat or a Republican; whether we are white, black or brown; whether we are Catholic, Orthodox, Mainline Protestant or Evangelical; whether we are American or Mexican or Asian or African; where we stand on a long list of hot-button issues. Either it's all a bunch of you know what compared to knowing Christ or it is not.

I remember a worship service in Kenya with the church in Sisit where we had helped build a bridge. There was joyful singing and a sermon or two. Scripture was read and numerous people shared a word of testimony. But every person who led worship in any way began by saying, "I love Jesus." It seemed silly at first, but as the service continued and we American guests shared in the service, we followed suit and began by saying, "I love Jesus," and I finally realized how profound this simple statement was, how this one reality — the love of Jesus — not only bound that community together, it brought us to them, and it binds us together as a church.

We heard evidence of this reality with the reading of the Lord's Prayer in five languages in addition to English. Five different members of our church from five different nations spoke in five different languages just after we spoke in English — but it was the same prayer coming from the same Jesus. Our love for him unites us across all of our differences.

But in addition to our common ground in Christ, certain values also unite us. We have many different beliefs about various subjects within this church alone, and we have even more differences with members of other churches around the world. But the most basic values and the most central to our faith — which, according to Jesus, involve the love God and the love of neighbor — we all share.

These values are found in the reading from Exodus, what we call the Ten Commandments. They provide a summary of what is found in the larger collection of Torah — over 600 commandments! We tend not to like commandments. We prefer to talk about freedom. But freedom requires responsibility and every community has rules.

In fact, every family has basic guidelines like — no one feeds the dogs at the table... except for Paw Paw, no one folds the clothes except for Mom, clean up after yourself and put your dishes in the dishwasher, even though Dad will rearrange them after you do... and Mom will rearrange them after Dad. We have to have rules to live by, even if we break them from time to time with varying consequences.

Yet, these particular rules are not just necessary, they express the basic loves of God and neighbor Jesus says are central to faith. The first four describe ways of loving God — by not having other gods, not making idols, not using God's name wrongly, and by honoring the sabbath. The last six describe ways of loving our neighbor — by honoring our parents and not committing murder or adultery; by not stealing, bearing false witness or coveting.

Now, this is a short list and eight of the ten commandments describe what not to do, but that's why we have over 600 more commandments and many of them describe what to do like feeding our poor brother or sister and welcoming the stranger in our land. And some

of us know these commandments are applied in narrow ways in ancient Israel. For example, adultery refers primarily to sleeping with another man's wife and the offense is against that other man. So, specific contexts call for a reinterpretation of the commandments.

But the big-picture message is a calling to love God and neighbor in practical ways, beginning with these ways. We don't put anything before God, not even our career or possessions. We don't use God's name carelessly, even when we want to convince someone we are right. We do not take another life; in fact, we don't even devalue others, since Jesus says that if we call our brother or sister a fool, we are in trouble. We do not bear false witness against our neighbors, including the faithful Muslim and the political opponent we want to tear down with the reckless tweet. We cannot love them and tell lies about them, and love is what binds us together.

It seems like some churches are held together by hatred of the other, not love, but hatred cannot form Christian community. I'm not saying they are not Christian. I am saying that hatred does not belong in the church. It may unite people for a time but not for good and not for Christ. Yet, even as I say this, I must acknowledge my tendency to hate the haters, which is just another form of the same problem. It is okay to disagree with a point of view but it is not okay to hate the person who holds it. So, I must confess with Paul that I have not obtained the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus but must ever press on toward it, that I am still a work-in-progress in regard to love, just like you.

So, I suppose the most precise way to state the message is this — we are united not just by our common ground in Christ but by our relentless, though ever-imperfect, efforts to love God and neighbor.

Yet, there is one other thing that unites us even in this time of division — the meal we share today at this table. Food in general unites us, though it has been more difficult to break bread together during COVID-19. There is nothing we Baptists in the South like to do better than to eat. But it's not just the food; there is something about breaking bread together that brings us closer to each other and to God. As Garrison Keillor once said, smell is the key that unlocks our deepest

memories. When I smell bacon cooking, I am taken back to my grandmother's kitchen in Lincoln. When I smell a Fattoush Salad, my mind goes to a restaurant in Nazareth and the twenty-two colleagues who travelled to Israel with me. And in these cases, as in many others, the memories are not just about food; they're about people and love.

The meal we share at this table works like this, only in even more powerful ways because of all the memories it stirs. Here we remember not only the story of that last meal Jesus shared with his disciples and the words he spoke over the bread and the cup. We remember the entire story of his life, death and resurrection; his teachings and acts of compassion; his courage and yearning for justice. Not only this, we also remember other communion meals we have shared at other times, here and other places, with fellow believers, some of whom are still with us and some of whom have entered eternity. And we remember that we share this meal not just with other members in our church today but with all believers in all times and places. This meal unlocks our deepest memories, and because it does, it binds us to each other and to God.

“The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord,” we sing, “she is his new creation by water and the word... her charter of salvation: one Lord, one faith, one birth; one holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food, and to one hope she presses with every grace endowed...” Is it enough to unite us in these turbulent times — our bond in Christ, our love for God and neighbor, our feast of hope — it is powerful stuff, but is it enough? It is.