

# Sermon for Sunday, January 22, 2023

## Third Sunday after Epiphany “Why Can’t We All Get Along?” Reverend Amy Zalk Larson Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Decorah, Iowa

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

The apostle Paul, in our second reading today, sounds a lot like a parent - especially one living in Decorah on say the fifth snow day by mid-January in a week that already had a planned no school day, just when the kids were finally getting back into routine after Christmas break. But I digress.

When Paul says, “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, be in agreement, let there be no divisions among you,” I hear a desperate parent pleading, “Please be kind. Please, everyone, stop arguing! Why can’t we all just get along?” I think my 101-year-old grandmother has felt the same way after some Thanksgivings with all her children and grandchildren, especially after elections.

Paul is making complicated theological appeals in his letter to a newly forming church in Corinth, but sometimes it seems like he’s most concerned about crowd control for an unruly bunch. Sometimes it feels like he’s just offering platitudes: “Let there be no divisions” can sound like “if you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all”; “don’t rock the boat”; “go along to get along”. The church is often expected to live by these platitudes. Be nice, be friendly, don’t disagree so that everything stays positive and upbeat. When there’s conflict in a congregation, the word on the street is often, what a bunch of hypocrites.

Paul continues, “Be of the same mind and of the same purpose.” What does *that* mean? How would that even be possible? Is Paul arguing that there is one faithful Christian perspective on immigration, or abortion, or how to care for creation? That the purpose of the church is to figure out that position and then get everyone on board with it? This approach seems to shape how we talk about Christians on the other sides of social issues these days. How can you be a Christian and think that? Why don’t they get it? People need to be more informed, then they’d understand.

I know I’ve said and thought all these things. I don’t think they’ve ever helped anyone around me to be of the same mind and the same purpose. They certainly haven’t erased the divisions within the body of Christ. So maybe we’re just back to going along to getting along?

Thankfully, the apostle Paul, led by the Spirit, is advocating something much deeper than crowd control. He isn’t advocating uniformity or conformity. And he certainly isn’t advocating niceness. There are lots of ways you could describe the Apostle Paul - nice isn’t one of them. Instead, Paul is saying we belong to Christ, you belong to Christ, I belong to Christ. That truth, that good news can shape everything we do, everything we say.

We belong to Christ. We belong to the body of Christ. We are loved and forgiven and set free, called into lives of meaning and purpose in God’s kingdom. That is true for us not because of how we vote or our position on issues or what we believe or how well we play with others. We belong to Christ because God is so committed to love and forgiveness and being in relationship

with us. This is the good news, and this is what unites us. This is what gives us purpose as the church, even when we disagree.

We're called to get this good news out into the world to help people experience the belonging, love and forgiveness that is for them in Christ Jesus. When people feel loved, when we feel loved, then we're able to follow Jesus who calls us to love. Then we're able to follow Christ Jesus who is working to heal, renew and change the world. Then we're able to be in relationship with others we find difficult and wrong. Even when we feel threatened by them, even when we feel frustrated, we are held in love always, they are held in love always. It isn't up to us to change them. It isn't up to us to get others in line. It isn't up to us to change the world. Our purpose is to follow Jesus and to love.

Love doesn't mean being nice. Jesus also wasn't particularly nice. Love doesn't mean turning a blind eye to injustice, not at all. It does mean that we're called to see others the way Jesus sees us, as beloved children of God. It means we're to approach others with curiosity, seeking to listen and understand, trying to explain our neighbor's actions in the kindest way possible. It means we are to love people enough to stay engaged with them rather than writing them off, trusting Christ Jesus can change us all through love.

This is so hard, especially right now. Yet we can do this because we are loved, because we are forgiven, because we belong to Christ. We need to do this because it is the only way that change will happen in our world. We humans change only when we feel loved and safe.

Beloved of God, we belong to Christ - Christ who let go of power and control humbled himself and loved to the end, even to the point of death. Which means, belonging to Christ has nothing to do with niceness or group think or demonizing others. Belonging to Christ is about love. It's about surrendering our own egos and agendas, trusting that the One who brings new life is at work far beyond what we can imagine or accomplish.

One way that this surrender happens for us is in congregational life. As we live in community and come up against people who frustrate us, people who think we're wrong, people who won't back down, we're also confronted with our own brokenness. When this happens, rather than trying to avoid all the mess or trying to get other people to get in line, we're called, again, to surrender our small, ego selves and remember that we all belong to Christ. We're called to a costly love made possible because we are loved.

We belong to Christ.

You belong to Christ.

You are loved and forgiven. I am loved and forgiven.

Together we can trust and follow the One who loves.

Let's take a moment of prayer.