

Last week, Dr. Fran Anderson preached on the first half of Colossians 3. She gave us an incredible reminder of two things: First, that transformation into the image of our Creator is a process--the sinful nature does not magically disappear at conversion. That fills me with hope, because perhaps I am...normal after all. And second, as believers, we have been given all the power we need to resist sin. Fran visually illustrated with the trash cans and dirty clothing that we have the capability and responsibility to remove the rags of immorality, greed and hate, and replace them with the clothes of compassion, humility and the rest of that list.

The concluding verse of Fran's passage says, "And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (Col 3:14) All of the virtues listed are the necessary ingredients for unity. Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and forgiveness. Unity depends on these things. It is striking that Paul doesn't exhaust the list of virtues; here he singles out the virtues that foster unity. Our Scripture this morning, the final half of Colossians 3 is all about unity.

Introduction

If you are new here, I am the youth pastor. One of my favorite things about being a youth pastor is playing a game called flour power. Many of you know about this game. It is similar to ultimate frisbee or a loose hybrid of football and keep away. There are two teams on the playing field, one defending their own goal while trying to score a goal on the opponents half of the field. The twist is this: the object that the team is trying to advance down the field is a sock, filled with flour. (Hold up sock) Not only is it easier to catch and throw than a frisbee or football, it leaves a grand, white imprint wherever it lands. A sweaty player ends up with balls of dough clinging to him or her. You can imagine it is fun for the laughs, but the reason I like it so much is that if you can convince an underdog team--no matter how overmatched they are, if you can convince them to make short passes instead of launching the long bombs (the Hail Mary's), this overmatched team will make the game competitive. One Wednesday night this spring, we had a large group of high schoolers here at church for various reasons. Wednesday was when our middle school youth group met this spring. Well, we suited the high schoolers up and a team of our middle schooler's went toe to toe with them. Spread the field, short passes, perfect teamwork and our middle school held their own. That is one of my favorite parts of being a youth pastor--who doesn't like an underdog story?

But, you know what inevitably happens-- A team gets down by a few points and begins to feel desperate. They revert to going for the home run...launching the sock three-quarters the way down the field into a group of people in hopes of getting lucky. Two or three sets of hands come down with the sock and someone from the outside of the scrum might shout, "Same team! Same team!" It is what we yell when teammates are accidentally struggling to wrestle the sock away from each other. "Same team" is a call for unity, a reminder that we have a single goal.

Here in chapter 3 of his letter to the Colossians, Paul is chanting, "Same team! Same team!" Of course he is using pious Christian words, like "one body" and "unity," but Paul is reminding the church in Colossae that they are on the "same team." In the beginning of chapter 2, Paul says, "I want you to know how hard I am contending for you...my goal is that [you] may

be encouraged in heart and united in love” (vv. 1-2). So the beginning of chapter 3 is a list of concrete ways the Colossians can practice unity--Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and forgiveness. Unity depends on these things. And once again, Paul doesn't exhaust the list of virtues; there are some really good virtues missing--chastity, temperance, diligence... Paul's list here are the virtues that foster unity. It leads me to believe that the overarching theme of Colossians 3 is a reminder that we are on the same team.

Movement 1 (*14 Beyond all these things put on love, which is (A) the perfect bond of (B) unity.*

15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.)

As I search for word pictures to illustrate “unity,” I realize I can't do better than what Paul uses right here in v. 15. The human body is the quintessential unified object. When a human wants to move from here to there, members of that body will actually go in opposite directions.



See. One hand goes this way, matching the opposite leg, and the alternating limbs go that way. There is diversity in unity. Do you know what unity without diversity is? It is called, “uniformity.” Do you know how a uniform body gets from here to there? (legs together, arms at side--jump awkwardly). All members moving in the same directions at once. No diversity. While entertaining to my young children, it is not an attractive or practical means of locomotion.

Too often, church people settle for uniformity. I am guilty, I know I am. It is human nature--the drift towards the comfortable and the known. Think about how most of us ended up here, at this church. We might have visited and recognized that we had beliefs and opinions in common with the majority of people. Our car probably didn't stand out in the parking lot, and we were somewhat familiar with enough of the songs. Our families looked like the rest of the families--like a church in Lake Wobegon, “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average.” In churches, uniformity is the default. We must be intentional if we want more than uniformity. Otherwise, as a church, we move forward in rather awkward manners. Friends, I confess that this truth is still making its way from my head to my heart. But we must pursue diversity.

Well, Paul chose the human body to illustrate unity. The body has many, many different parts. Each part has a different function--as we have already seen, even body parts that appear in pairs often work in opposite directions, to maintain balance or provide some other benefit to the body, depending on its goal. Often, body parts are working without you even knowing it. We played kickball last Saturday--with 5 other youth ministries in town. Kickball is not a regular part of my exercise routine. Last Sunday morning, rolling out of bed, I learned about all the

different members of my body that were contributing the day before. We call that sore--but the good kind of sore. Members of my body tried something new for a short time. It hurt, but I am healthier and stronger for doing it and I look forward to doing it again. In September, we are going to ask members of this body, FCC, to try something new for a short time. We want you to be in a small group called a Faith Group, for 12 weeks. You will be healthier and stronger after doing it.

Paul picked the best illustration for unity, but as you might guess from my love for flour power, my favorite illustration would be a sports team. Coincidentally, the college basketball world lost a hero last week. Coach John Wooden died at the age of 99. Many argue that he is the greatest coach of all time...in any sport. I am confident we will never see another coach win 10 national championships in a 12 year time span. He was the men's basketball coach at UCLA around 40 years ago. It was very easy to get "lost in research" for this illustration because by all accounts, and not just the postmortem praise that we are all destined to receive, but according to every writer, John Wooden lived a life worthy of emulation. He embodied compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. And all those virtues contributed to his success on the basketball court.

I read one of Coach Wooden's biographies several years ago, and my absolute favorite story about him was the one about scouting. See, there is a lot of pressure on college coaches to win. Probably on high school coaches too, because we really love our winners. In college, winning translates to profit, and so coaches do what they can to increase their advantage. A common practice is to scout the opposition. That means watching the opponent play other teams, and taking notes about their strategies and habits and adjusting their game plan accordingly. Large coaching staffs have coaches designated solely to this task.

Coach Wooden did not believe in scouting the opposition. In fact, on more than one occasion, he learned who the opponent was only 30 minutes before the game was to begin. How could he be so successful, when he was not seeking the same advantage that every other team did? His philosophy was this: in basketball there are 5 members of each team on the floor, and if each of those members performs his role precisely like he is supposed to--just like Coach Wooden had them practice, if each member successfully fulfilled his role, then it did not matter who the opposition was. By executing the fundamentals of their given role, the team became what one coach called a "five headed monster with 10 squeaky feet." A single, unified, five headed monster with ten hustling feet all playing for the same team.

Not only did Coach Wooden not scout other teams, they stopped scouting him, because what he did was so predictable. Each member of the team simply fulfilled his role. Each member executed the fundamentals of his position. It is an amazing picture of a body...and what a body is capable of. Operating in harmony, five united members of the same team created a dynasty that will never be equalled.

Movement 2 (*16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*)

After Paul reminds them that they are one body, that is, the same team, he gives them singing instructions. Don't you agree that we could all afford to take Paul's instruction to heart? Don't get me wrong, this is, hands down, the most singing-ist church I have ever belonged to. But I look around sometimes when we are singing, and I can see on people's faces, some of you are just scared to let loose. You worry about what you sound like. You worry about what people think. I do. I want to sing harmony so badly...but I can't. I mean, as long as Tim is up here, I can get the melody easy enough. But I want to follow Steve, only I am worried about embarrassing myself. So I sing in unison--I default to uniformity. Every song needs a melody. It is crucial to a song, but a song, or a psalm or a hymn, they are best when there is harmony.

Music, really good music, relies on diversity and unity--whether it is a barbershop quartet or a wind ensemble or a van full of teenagers. Like a Coach Wooden basketball team, they all have different people, with varying parts all contributing to a single goal. Alone, as beautiful as their part may be, alone any one of those parts would be incomplete. Together, they make a masterpiece. Paul tells us, you are all on the same team, so sing to God with everything you are.

Why? Why is unity so important to Paul? Why is unity so important to God? God made order out of chaos. The world God created is harmonious. Unity is the default for God's creation. Yet, unity has been a struggle for human kind ever since the Fall. Unity is one of the defining characteristics of the Kingdom of God--Jesus' life and sacrifice on the Cross is called the Atonement--literally, At One Ment. Making one out of what was previously many. Uniting previously separate parties--reconciling estranged members. The Kingdom of God is a kingdom of unity.

And God wants everyone, absolutely everyone, to be invited into his Kingdom. A primary way that happens is when those outside the Kingdom take notice of something attractive in the Kingdom. When diverse Christians model unity, (which most people recognize is missing in humanity), they create opportunities to introduce people to Jesus Christ who has made unity possible. There is a missional value to unity. In other words, unity is valuable for the sake of God's mission to draw all people to himself. In the past year, Faith Covenant Church has committed to take the necessary steps to become a healthy, missional church. With around 300 of us, we are going to have a variety of opinions on what those steps ought to be. Like two teammates grasping for the same flour sock, we must remember in months and years of growth and excitement to come, that we are on the same team. People who observe us wade through the uncertain waters of transition united will be drawn to God. There is a missional value to unity.

Movement 3 *(18 Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.*

19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

21 Fathers, ¹do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. 25 Those who do wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.

1 Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.)

I hope you believe in the missional value of unity. Because here is the rub--it starts at home. That is why Paul includes a “Domestic Code” right here. After all, it seems a little out of place...unless we really believe the missional value of unity. I wish it was simpler than that. Because at home is where I want to let my guard down, indulge in selfishness, and be careless with words. I don’t know about you, but growing up, my family’s biggest fights were always on Sundays. On the way to church, or on the way home. Maybe it was sharing bathrooms and mirrors or maybe it was the one time each week when all seven of us crammed into our Chevy Citation. Whatever the reason, Sunday was fight day. As families, if we are acting like we are on the same team when we are at church, but not practicing unity at home, then all we are is an act. The Greek word for actor gave us the word hypocrite. Which of course repels people to the same degree that unity attracts them.

Paul ends with instructions for slaves, who were members of the household in that day. Although it was a slavery quite different than the slavery of American history and different than the slavery that is still present in the world today, be clear about this: Paul’s instruction to slaves and masters was not a defense of the institution. God has been working toward eradicating slavery from the beginning of the Old Testament until now. As we join God in the work of his Kingdom, we must actively stand against the injustice of slavery. However, if you are looking for a transferable principle, here it is: Families, if there is anyone in your household who is not family, remember that you are on the same team.

Paul ends with the outsider but begins with the nucleus--instructions to wives and husbands. I had a pastor once who asked the question, “Who is winning in your marriage?” It is a great question, because too often, we are guilty of keeping score. Who contributes the most; who is always letting the other one down? Who sins against the who the most? So the question is natural: who is winning in your marriage? We keep score, but we are on the same team! Don’t you see the problem? You can’t win against someone who is on your team. Wives, husbands, you are one body, you are united, you’re on the same team.

Children and parents, you are also on the same team. Youth, trust your parents. Coach Wooden used to require his players to put their socks on a single, precise way. I don’t think any of you students have it that bad. So trust that your parents have your best interest at heart. And there is a missional value to this unity. Your friends will ask, “How do you do it? Why do you obey your parents so easily?” And you tell them about the One who obeyed his Father, and climbed onto the cross to make reconciliation a reality for us all.

Parents, I had a professor at seminary that asked this question: “Do you love them for who they are, or who they could become?” Do you love them for their potential--if you could just squeeze them into your mold? Or do you love your kids for who they are now--maybe a misfit, but your teammate just the same? We are all on the same team, there is missional value to our unity, and this mission begins in the home.

Conclusion

Last week in major league baseball, a young Venezuelan pitcher lost out on history on what should have been the final out of the game. Did you hear about this? Armando Galarraga

is a very average pitcher who had a very spectacular game. The other team did not reach base for the first 8 2/3rds innings--no walks, no hits. Do you know how rare that is? A perfect game has only been accomplished 20 times in the 140 year history of Major League Baseball. I think there are 30 teams right now in the league (there haven't always been that many). The all play at least 162 games in a season (the season hasn't always been that long) with a splendidly long post season. Multiply and add those number all together and you get like a gazillion. Pastor Don Logue has a better chance at a hole in one. I think, if you live in Pinellas County, you have a better chance at getting struck by lighting! Armando Galarraga had a shot at making history when this happened with the 27th batter: (slide 2, slide 3)



The umpire called the baserunner safe. He was clearly out. It wasn't even close. The pitcher grimaced, returned to the mound and got the final out. (slide 4)



Armando Galarraga would have been justified to get excited towards the umpire. Some of his teammates did. James Joyce was the name of the umpire. When the game was over, he asked for a meeting with Armando Galarraga and his coach, to ask forgiveness. They forgave him, and agreed with baseball players everywhere who said over and over again, "It was unfortunate, because this umpire is one of the best." The next day after being given a new Corvette from Chevrolet as conciliation (Slide 5),



Armando Galarraga carried the lineup card to the umpire in a display of unity. (slide 6)



Last week, everyone in the baseball world was talking about this. Amazingly, almost all of them agreed with Galarraga's teammate, Brandon Inge, who said at the time of his interview he was still in awe of what he witnessed. Inge, who undoubtedly would have loved to witness his teammate pitch the 21st perfect game in history said, "To me, it's the best story ever because of the sportsmanship that was shown and because of the way it was handled." It is the best story ever because two people who could have...who should have been estranged were reconciled. There was something missional about their unity, for soon, all of baseball was on the same team, admiring the grace and peace which the pitcher and the umpire embodied. It is the best story ever because it points to the Kingdom, where a young man surrendering his ego, and granted forgiveness to all.

Benediction

So now, as we go our different ways, let us leave no doubt to all who witness us that we-- in our families and in our church, we are all on the same team, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.