

⁶They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, because they were prevented by the Holy Spirit from speaking the word in the province of Asia. ⁷When they went as far as Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. ⁸So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹A vision appeared to Paul during the night. A Macedonian man was standing there, urging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" ¹⁰As soon as he had seen the vision, we immediately made plans to proceed to Macedonia, because we concluded that God had called us to preach the good news to them.

We live in a world that is focused on division. In international matters, I could give you a list of countries, and you could probably tell me which ones are our friends and which are our foes. In politics, parties often win by demonizing the other, convincing us that if we let the other team get into power, life in our country or state or county is about to become unlivable. In race relations, somehow, we've turned back the clock to the pre-1960's, where it seems everything is judged through the prism of race. Before we pass judgement on a murder, we ask what color the perpetrator and victim were, as if a certain combination could excuse the sin of hate in a person's heart.

In our own community we see an obsession with division. The kids at school find all different ways to divide and exclude. Workplaces are filled with people taking this side or that for or against a boss or coworker. Even our clubs and organizations, things we do for leisure, can be split by a spirit of divisiveness. And how many of us don't have cracks of division that have widened and split up our own families? For a world where every other commercial on TV is about how united we are, we're certainly not good at unity.

Why are we so bad at unity? It's because our sinful nature instills in us a tribal mindset. We see the world as people like us and people unlike us. And we see those people unlike us as a threat. We draw the boundaries of unity to protect ourselves from perceived threats and make ourselves feel superior to those who are not within the boundaries of unity we've set.

But when it comes to unity, the best the world can do is some patchwork of unity. It certainly feels great on the surface to look around at a coalition of different groups united around some idea or cause. But as soon as the cause is complete, or as soon as some new cause gets cast into the spotlight, the group fractures and now it's back to infighting. It happens every year with sports teams, as all the players work to keep their egos at bay to win a championship. And after they win – or even during the season when they go on a losing streak – the locker room can fracture with all the self-important players turning on each other. Or, how many people have joined a movement, just for the movement to turn on them? French history is filled with many examples of people who led rebellions, only to be killed by those they led who thought the rebellion should go further. Unity is great...until division inevitably shows its ugly face. Again, the world promises unity, but it seems that all we get is more division.

That takes us to our reading from Acts this morning. Paul and his companions were on his second mission journey. They began by visiting the churches he set up during his first journey, but now they wanted to move west. After visiting a few churches in the region of Galatia, they were set to push even further west into the region of Asia (think western Turkey). But in some way, by direct revelation or by controlling the circumstances, the Holy Spirit kept them from entering the region. They headed north, ready to go share the gospel in Bithynia, but again, the Holy Spirit stopped them. It seemed their mission field was shrinking. Why would God not allow them to preach to these people in Asia and Bithynia. God quickly answered that question

in a vision to Paul. In this vision, a man from Macedonia – mainland Greece – was standing there, calling Paul to come and help them. When the vision had passed, Paul and his fellow missionaries set plans to go to Macedonia.

Now, maybe you wonder what this is all about. God sets their plans to go to this place and not that, so what's the big deal? The gospel message they are carrying is about to cross continental lines. Up to this point, they've been slowly broadening the reach of the good news of the resurrection. First, it started in the city where it all happened, Jerusalem. Then, it spread to the regions of Judea and Samaria, followed by other close regions. But now it was going into Europe, right into the heart of the Roman empire. Why is that important? Because it shows, yet again, that the gospel is for everyone.

Think about what that mission into Macedonia would lead to. The message of forgiveness and life in Jesus would spread to people from incredibly diverse backgrounds from business owners to slaves, from the arrogant and haughty to the broken and suicidal. And many worried hearts would be filled with comfort. The gospel of Christ would be so powerful, that three hundred years later, it would change the heart of an emperor named Constantine, and he would declare Christianity the new official religion of the largest nation on earth, one that had been governed by pagan polytheism for hundreds of years. The gospel changes hearts and even shapes world history with its good news. It creates unity in the Savior in a world filled with people of different races, tribes, and languages.

We are unified in the gospel too. You could even point to this reading for today as one of the reasons we are unified, as many of our ancestors brought the old faith from Europe here and shared it with us. We are united, not because of our family heritage or our opinions on how society should run. In fact, we may be very different when it comes to those things. But our unity comes from our faith in Jesus. We are brothers and sisters with each other, no matter the color of our skin or the social class we find ourselves in, because God has made us his children, heirs of his perfect Kingdom.

But just because we are united in Christ, doesn't mean Satan will not try to sow division within God's family. He does this at church when he leads us to see everything – including doctrine and our church's mission – through the scope of politics. Or he tempts us to see our church like a country club, where we only want the "right" people to join and do everything we can to protect our own interests. But let's not stop at church. The deceiver sows division within the family as well, God's foundation of society. If Satan can create division in the family and crack that foundation for a stable society, what can be built upon it that will not also shift and tear apart with time? Be on guard in your own life because the devil is at work in our congregation, in your family, and even in your heart to sow division that will become more important in your mind than the gospel. Churches have been split over the color of the new carpeting. Families have fallen apart because of poorly played euchre hands. Do not underestimate your enemy's ability to drive a wedge in the smallest gap and keep hammering.

But what is it that unites us together? It is that basis of Christ and his good gospel of peace. The gospel, as always, remains a free gift for all. The fact that Jesus took care of all sins at the cross means there is no one this promise of the gospel does not belong to, even the worst sinner.

We see many examples of once enemies united in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul himself had once been a hunter of Christians and now served shoulder-to-shoulder in the ministry of reconciliation in Christ with those he persecuted. Onesimus, a runaway slave that wronged his master, Philemon, was welcomed back to live, not as slave and master, but as brothers in Christ.

We see examples outside of Scripture too. Roll back the clocks a few decades, and you would see in some of our German Lutheran churches, American Soldiers from WWII sitting next to men who served in the SS of

Nazi Germany, from firing bullets and dropping bombs on each other to joining their hearts and voices to confess their shared faith with the Apostles' Creed. When I was at one of our sister churches in Ohio, I watched a man sit next to his ex-wife in church every Sunday. They had gone through a nasty divorce, and their relationship as husband and wife was irreconcilable. But while they were not united in their marriage vows – and maybe not even in friendship – anymore, they sat together every Sunday as sister and brother in Christ, sinners saved by the blood of Jesus.

You have the unifying message of the gospel, the good news that can bring hated enemies together in love and joy. Do not let division overcome you. Do not look at the world as the devil wants you to, through tribal-colored glasses, obsessed with race, politics, or any other dividing line that pits person against person. See the world through the lens of the gospel. And where there is division, patch it up. Go to the cross together, confessing your sins to each other and offering those words of forgiveness in Jesus. Do not continue to let tribalism and bitterness steal from you the unity that Christ offers.

Do you hear the Macedonian's call to you today too? To bring the gospel to the different and divided? To deliver the one thing that brings lasting unity to world that can only conquer by dividing? The good news of Christ conquers by uniting. Go, spread that gospel of indivisible unity in Jesus. Amen.