

**St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
September 6, 2020**

**In View of God's Mercy: United in Christ Alone
Romans 15:23-16:27**

It is only here, under the cross, in view of God's mercy, that we can be united.

Over the last few weeks, we've seen ways that Satan can divide the church.

- The Holy Spirit has given us different spiritual gifts. That diversity is meant to bless the church, but Satan uses this diversity to produce envy and pride in our hearts, and the church is divided.
- We have the call to love unhypocritically, but we often hurt each other, sometimes without even realizing it, and the desire for vengeance wells up in our hearts. More division.
- We live in a time when our response to government often leaves us divided.
- And last week we saw how "disputable matters," things that God has not commanded nor forbidden, but things we treasure and hold to passionately, can divide us. We look down on those who don't agree with us and use some kind of force or compulsion to get people to do what we want them to do.

We have all been used by Satan to spread division within God's church. That's why I stand here, under the cross, to see God's mercy more clearly. Here, under the cross, I'm reminded that God the Father looks at me through the cross. My sins that have caused division—Jesus died for them all and brought peace between me and God.

This is what we have in common. We can all stand before God only as he looks at us through Christ. Here, as we consider God's mercy, we are united in Christ alone.

Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome to create and preserve that unity in Christ alone. The Holy Spirit preserved this letter for us to study so that we might enjoy that unity in Christ alone. The reason this unity is so important is found in the last verses of the letter:

*Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, **so that all the Gentiles (nations) might come to the obedience that comes from faith**—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen (Romans 16:25-27).*

This was Paul's goal. That all the nations might come to find peace and unity under the cross. That is our goal. By why is unity so important to fulfill that goal? Let's go back to the first verses of our text:

*But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and **to have you assist me on my journey there**, after I have enjoyed your company for a while (Romans 15:23-24).*

Paul was writing to the Romans so that they could assist him in his mission effort. Without unity, that assistance would be impossible.

Have you ever attended a church service where you prayed, “Lord, don’t let a visitor come today”? I have. The tension was so thick, the disunity so obvious, that I was sure visitors would pick up on it. Jesus said, “All people will know you are my disciples if you love one another.” If we don’t love one another, if we can’t be united in Christ alone, the mission will suffer.

In contrast, a united church is a beautiful thing. As a united church, we can serve like the congregation in Rome, a source of support and help for our mission partners around the world. As a united church, we can provide assistance to one another. We can offer ministries that may be just the thing that a friend or coworker needs, and through that ministry, your brothers and sisters here at St. Paul’s help you carry out your personal mission work, your goal to bring the nations near and far closer to the Savior.

Another reason to strive to preserve unity in Christ alone is found in the last paragraph of Romans 15:

*I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to **join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.** Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the Lord’s people there, so that I may come to you with joy, by God’s will, and in your company be refreshed. The God of peace be with you all. Amen (Romans 15:30-33).*

It amazes me how Paul over and over asks the saints to join him in his struggle by praying for him. A united church can join with Christians around the world and pray for them. Paul asked that the unbelievers would not hinder the ministry and that division within the church would not hinder the ministry. Aren’t those needs just as vital today? Satan is stirring up the world in opposition to the church, not just in persecution, but in all kinds of teachings that are leading people away. Satan is stirring up division within the church. Let us strive for unity so that we can join together in praying for each other.

But how? How do we strive to preserve the unity of the faith in the bond of peace? We can follow Paul’s example. In Romans 16, he names nearly 30 people who “worked very hard in the Lord,” men and women. He took the time to express his thanks for that unity of the faith.

Let a spirit of thankfulness fill your heart this week. Follow Paul’s example and spend some quiet time in thanksgiving to God for people you know who have “worked very hard in the Lord,” perhaps in the church at large or who have made a huge impact on your spiritual life.

And then dig into God’s Word to protect this unity in Christ alone. After greeting all those people by name in Romans 16:1-16, Paul gives this warning:

*I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are **contrary to the teaching you have learned.** Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise*

about what is good, and innocent about what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you (Romans 16:17-20).

Let us strive to preserve this unity in Christ by knowing the “teachings you have learned.” No one could have foretold the challenges that the church would face in 2020. None of us know the challenges to unity that the church will face in 2021. All I know for sure is that the key to unity is that we know the Bible, the teachings God wants us to learn.

If you are systematically getting to know these teachings of the Bible, God be praised. But if you aren't reading it daily, I invite you to join me in my daily Bible reading pattern. I am sending a daily email to help people grow in their faith. If daily reading seems too hard for you, join Pastor Nate in his *Following the Promise* study as he traces the promise of the Savior who would crush Satan's head from the Garden of Eden, to the cross and empty tomb, to you and to the eternity that God has prepared for you. Make a commitment to be a daily student of the teachings of God's Word, because that is where we shall find unity in Christ alone.

This past week I've been faced with the possibility of losing someone near and dear to me. Thankfully this individual knows the God of peace who announced peace through the cross. This individual knows that eternal life awaits on the other side of death.

This experience focuses me more than ever on our mission: That all nations might live life “in view of God's mercy” (Romans 12:1). That more people would know the peace that is found at the foot of the cross. A united church is a powerful tool to carry out that mission. God grant us unity in Christ alone so that we might help each other and pray for each other as we share the hope that we have. In this way, “Satan will soon be crushed under our feet” (Romans 16:20). Amen.

prepared by Pastor Pete Panitzke
414-422-0320, ext. 122; ppanitzke@stpmuskego.org

My Next Steps

- **Pray:** “Join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.” Let someone know that you are praying for them.
- **Give Thanks:** Spend time in thanksgiving for the people who have “worked hard in the Lord” or who has been a spiritual mother or father to you.
- **Strive for unity based on God's Word:** Make a plan to grow in your knowledge of God's Word,
 - Join Pastor Pete in the daily Bible readings (see daily emails or the reading plan at the Welcome Center).
 - Join the next *Following the Promise* study. Email Pastor Nate at nstrobels@stpmuskego.org.
 - Join a zoom or in-person small group Bible study. Email Pastor Pete at ppanitzke@stpmuskego.org.

GroupWork

1. Skim over Romans 16:1-16, where Paul mentions many people who have “worked hard in the Lord.” Who are some of the people in your life or your congregation for whom you are thankful because they “worked very hard in the Lord”?
2. Read Romans 15:23-33. Paul shares his mission plans and his request for prayers. Do you have a “mission plan,” an individual or family that you hope to bring closer to Christ? Take time as a group to pray for each other’s mission plans.
3. Read Romans 16:17-20. Paul had just celebrated unity in Christ alone by mentioning many people by name. What are we to “watch out for” that threatens to destroy this unity?
4. Compare Paul’s instruction to Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:13-20. How does the warning about the narrow way to life give urgency to Jesus command to watch out for false prophets?
5. How does it make you feel to hear Paul’s words: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Romans 16:20)? When do you feel crushed by Satan? When do you feel Satan is crushed by you?
6. Close with the Lord’s Prayer as a prayer that our Father would create and preserve unity in God’s church based on Christ alone.