***“ Bind Us Together Lord!”***

***Good morning. Hope all is well.***

***ANNOUNCEMENTS: Larry Wheeler is in the hospital with Covid, Shan & Trudy are still sick with Covid, Debbie had her surgery and has been recovering at home and her sister Betty has passed away this week.***

This is our third sermon in our four-part series entitled, Gratitude; living a life of thankfulness. This 3d lesson is titled **“Bind** **Us Together Lord.”** Our first was on the basics of gratitude and the second was on what hinders us from expressing and being thankful, grumbling and murmuring, thus robbing us of God’s grace.

This morning we will be covering what unites us in God’s grace giving us an overwhelming feeling of gratitude.

As we have discovered throughout this series, gratitude is more, a lot more than just saying thank you. Gratitude is a deep understanding of what the Lord has done for us and continues to do in our lives and those around us.

That God has freely given us His unmerited grace. What should come to mind are the words of the Apostles written for us and to us. While we were yet sinners, Jesus died for us. We could further say that Jesus died in our place. He paid our price for our sins!

***Here is our main point: There is much that can divide us – but GRATITUDE will unite us!***

PRAYER: *Lord, help us to see and believe the best in one another, help us to be grateful for others, and grateful for the sacrifice Jesus made for us all. Amen!*

Let’s take a few moments to think about our friends and who we spend time with.

Do we hang with people that only think like we do?

Do we gravitate towards people who only agree with our way of thinking?

Or put another way. Do we choose only those with the same stripes?

For too many of us our ideological differences and even politics place stress on the relationships that matter most.

For anyone on Facebook can see in real time how this plays on our minds.

When we listen to podcasts, watch news shows, read newspapers, choose social media followers that hit like to what we post, and read articles that not only support our beliefs but affirm our “rightness” in our beliefs, we should not be surprised by the outcome. By feeding our ideologies with only like-mindedness, we have starved out a significant part of human connectedness. ***This can not only affect our society, but if not careful, the church as well!***

Inevitably, our added “rightness vs. wrongness” mindset has driven a wide wedge through God’s blessed creation, leaving a deep ravine for divisiveness to take root and flourish.

I remember back a few years ago when C.D. Beagle asked me to go with him to a meeting of the Church of Christ and another group of Christians. The purpose of that meeting was to see if the two could find enough common ground to unite. I was very young in the faith and soon realized, listening to both groups take time to speak, that this was heading nowhere. Each side was actually saying in so many words that if you give up your belief system and accept ours, we can unite. Our rightness outweighs your wrongness.

Each side was insisting on their “rightness” rather than concentrating on what was common between them. I have since learned that both groups had far more in common than not. And that their differences were quite small and mostly hung on tradition and not the bible!

***But what if we focused on the things that unite us more than the things that divide us!***

Division in ideology and even politics is nothing new. The early church struggled with division as well.

When we do not view our differences with such high stakes, and realize that all of us have had different backgrounds and experiences, the various thoughts and passions can add flavor to life. We must not rob ourselves of how dynamic conversations can expand our own thinking. We must forgo the attitude of our “rightness” surpassing others “wrongness”.

I guess another way of putting it is not to be so closed minded!

The early church was quite a group. They came from different countries, tribes and languages.

They were of different classes. Poor and rich, young and old, educated and uneducated.

 Sheep herders and business owners. For the most part, the early church was made up of society’s outcasts.

However, their following of Jesus and what He taught them did not lead to division, but to unity! A new faith community arose, the church. (Read Acts 2:43-47)

As we read the various letters written by the Apostles we discover that they reached out to settling the divisions that arose in the early church so they could concentrate on what they all had in common.

To add to this, the early church suffered under intense persecution. The early Christians were the religious minority and despised by the unbelieving majority.

 They were laughed at, mocked, spit upon, beaten and even killed for their belief that Jesus was Lord and rose from the grave.

Life was hard and one would think that they certainly lacked joy in their lives.

However, the early church was far from joyless! Unifying the body was a top priority of its leaders as they sought a faith practice that would surpass the persecutions and any differences they had.

Therefor, what was the key that not only held them together but caused them to grow?

We just read what the key is. Acts 2:46 & 47 “**And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, (v47) praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”**

People were seeing this new faith emerging. They could see the joy and peace they had. The closeness, the love for each other regardless of their background or standing. They could see all being treated equally. That is why the early church grew so fast. The people could see the gratitude the early church was overflowing with. People wanted to be a part of this new faith established by Jesus.

**The common bond, the glue that held them together, the one thing that brought great joy and unity of faith was the sharing of communion!**

You may remember in our first sermon in this series we brought up the biblical words “eucharista & charis.”

The English word ***gratitude*** stems from the Latin word ***gratia,*** which means to ***give thanks***. The Bible takes this one-word definition further. In the Bible is the word ***eucharista,*** which stems from the word ***charis,*** which means ***grace.***

Charis (grace) – a favor, an act of goodwill, and loving kindness for which we do not deserve.

Eucharista is an offering of thanks out of the abundance of grace shown to us. It is to give thanks to the Lord with delight because we have received forgiveness through His grace (charis).

In the early church the first day of the week services were not for the purpose to call the faithful to repentance or to make them aware of their sins. Although this was important it wasn’t their main reason for meeting. Their main reason for meeting was to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus through communion!

***This was where the true deeper meaning of the eucharista was observed. It was and is a service of remembrance and gratitude for God’s grace!***

Every first day of the week was a communion service. The communion was and should be today the DNA that binds us together. We can learn from our early church brothers and sisters attitudes and understanding of why the communion service was so vitally important.

You wouldn’t hear them saying as so many of us do, “We are going to church today.” They would have instead said, “We are going to eucharista today!” (We are going to celebrate communion.)

It was and is that which can melt away any differences. The communion put everyone on equal footing before God. In the book of Romans we read that all have sinned and fallen short.

 We read in Acts 2:46-47 that these gatherings were gatherings of thankfulness and gratitude, with praising in their hearts to God for what He has done for them. They had so much joy in the midst of so much persecution. Nothing was going to hinder their gratitude for God. They shared what little they had with all who needed it. They had glad and generous hearts. As in our last lesson, when you feel grumpy think on this!

***Their many differences melted into pettiness when compared to God’s grace!***

From the *“Story of Christianity”* by Harpers Press we read of the early church;

“Every Sunday was a celebration which began with giving thanks for the communion. Before taking communion, believers would offer gratitude to God, recounting at length His acts and testifying to the power of His Spirit. Following the the communion meal, believers shared in the second round of gratitude prayers. And after these prayers, they would move into a time of caring for one another’s physical needs by taking up an offering and sharing of their resources.

***Amongst all their differences and stresses, what unified the believers in practice, in spirit, and in mind? GRATITUDE!***

Different passions and convictions fuel much of the trouble outside and inside the church.

Jesus said that although we are in the world we are not of the world. What I take this to mean is that we have to be on guard that the worlds way of thinking doesn’t permeate the church.

Have you ever heard these words or maybe said them yourself?

1. This is how I see it
2. That is not what I think
3. If you could only see it my way

The early church understood (to which I would argue the church today has a lot to understand about gratitude), that focusing on God’s grace in our lives through corporate gratitude is a strong unifier that places us all on a level field. Why gratitude? Because it is a position before God that reminds us all of what we do not deserve! (Romans 3:20-24)

Let’s begin to wrap this morning’s lesson up:

The early church understood that the remedy for keeping out this spirit of division was to embrace a spirit of grace, a spirit of gratitude.

When we do we will naturally take up an attitude of grace ourselves, humble in heart and not worried about our rightness but do as Jesus did, care for one another and look for the good in each other. We will learn to be thankful for each other. Isn’t that what Jesus meant when He said that we are the light of the world, a city set on a hill. The early Christians understood this. That’s why they were able to hang on in the midst of persecution. That’s why the early church grew. People seen the light of the gospel through those early Christians.

How it brought people from all walks of life together all singing praises and having all things in common. Their bonds of love their joy was sought after.

Paul and the early church preached this – a gospel of grace.

They knew that if we would slow down, choose gratitude, and thank God for one another, we would live like Christ. Ultimately, they knew this would not only keep the peace and keep us humble but would make a difference in the world.

If you find yourself having trouble with changing your attitude to one of gratitude, think on this;

Picture our Lord Jesus the night before and the day of His crucifixion. What was His attitude during this trying time He was going through?

Did He retaliate because of His rightness? Did He condemn those that beat Him or spit on Him? Did He seek revenge for those that drove the jagged spikes through His flesh? Did He hate those gathered before Him mocking as He hung on the cross?

We sing a song titled “He Could Have Called Ten Thousand Angels” and the verse continues, “but He died alone for you and me.”

He didn’t seek revenge or retaliate against those that day. He humbled Himself and did just as the Father commanded Him. He even spoke from the cross, “Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do” He fulfilled God the Father’s quest to give all a way back to his presence. John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life!”

***That is what generates gratitude!***

That God loves us and wants the best for us. How can we not be grateful? How can we not be humble? How can we not show the same to all that we come into contact with?

What if we expressed gratitude for one another? What if we said words of thanks, wrote words of thanks, and prayed words of thanks?

The Psalmist understood the power of gratitude, which is why he told us entrance into the gates of the Lord was through words of thanksgiving and songs of praise (read psalm 100)

It is my prayer that all of us humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord giving thanks and expressing gratitude to God and each other. Putting away our urge to be always right and having thing go our way.

 May we concentrate on all that we have in common not on the few things that may try and separate us!

God set us free to love and share gratitude, to share joy with each other. All of us have sinned and fallen short. But through the cross of Christ and His resurrection God has brought us all to our knees.

Jesus calls us, though many, to become one in love, in caring, and in spirit, united in gratitude for what He has done for us.

 ***The cross is what binds us all together.***

If you find yourself struggling with with your attitude, take it to the Lord in prayer. Ask others to pray with and for you. Pray for an attitude of gratitude.

If you have not as yet made the decision to become a Christ follower, what hinders you? Jesus said, ***“Ask, and it shall be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened.”***

***Just ask and seek and knock. Jesus is there to greet you into His Kingdom. Contact us and make that your first step into a new life. A forgiven life, a grateful life, a saved life!***